

Let Me See You Anew



Loki's

MISCHIEF

LAUFEYSON

HORNS OF MISCHIEF (RINELIN)

# Chapter 1

It was late autumn afternoon. Grey clouds rolled slowly over Manhattan shrouding the setting sun from view. The air was humid with mist and smog slowly condensing into a nasty drizzle.

Tony was lounging on his comfortable and pricy couch pointedly ignoring Steve's rambling about team meetings. So what if he missed one, or all of them, they never discussed anything important anyway. And besides, watching Fury's ugly mug for over an hour was a real downer. He obviously had better things to do. Like teach DUM-E how to do cupcakes, totally legit work. Bruce was doing a crossword-puzzle and sipping his god awful herbal tea, unconcerned with Steve's lecture. Tony supposed that no one wanted to try and order him around anyway.

Suddenly the drizzle outside turned into an outright downpour and a low rumble shook the Avengers Tower. The superheroes looked at themselves confused.

'Thor?' Tony asked standing up from his sprawl and going to the vast floor-to-ceiling windows separating the lounge from his landing pad and balcony.

As if summoned, the god materialized outside, drenched from the rain, Mjölnir in hand and another figure huddled close to him. At first Tony couldn't recognize who it was, then another lightning flashed and the inventor was left dumbfounded. It was not possible.

'Is that Loki with him?' Bruce asked quietly.

And indeed it was. The God's of Mischief face was turned towards Thor's chest, his hand tightly gripping the Thunderer's breastplate, but it was definitely him.

The older god said something that made Loki shook his head in denial, but Thor didn't relent and gently tugged him towards the stunned Avengers.

Tony could hear Bruce's breathing speeding up and he himself felt a stab of anger in his chest, right next the arc reactor.

Then Thor stopped in front of them with Loki still pressed close to his side.

'May we enter?' The Thunderer asked Tony. Even being called the Avengers Tower now it was still Tony's building. Rain was pouring down the god's golden hair and face and his wet red cape seemed to weight ten times more than normal. Stark could almost swear that he looked much older than the last time they saw him.

'What is he doing here?' The engineer growled. Shouldn't he be rotting in a fucking dungeon somewhere deep under your fairy land?'

'Please friends, let me explain,' Thor started.

'Then explain and better do it quickly, before I have Jarvis call Fury,' Tony was seething. How could he bring the Trickster back here after all that happened in New York because of him? After all they went through and the damage the city and its people suffered.

He then heard a familiar voice, except that it was muffled and very faint.

'Clearly your friends do not want me here brother. We should seek accommodations elsewhere.'



Loki's voice was wrong. It lacked the god's normal overwhelming presence and confidence. Instead it sounded strained and resigned.

'Nay brother, you require their healer's assistance and a place where you can rest undisturbed. Please Anthony!' The Thunderer begged and it was really heart breaking to listen. Tony quickly glanced at Steve and Bruce, then nodded.

'Alright, but no tricks, you understand?'

'I can assure you, I am currently unable to perform any *'tricks'* that you are so afraid of,' Loki snorted, but it came out weak and without his usual malice.

Tony really looked at him then. Everything about the Trickster was off. His posture, his voice, the way he clung to Thor as if he was going to faint if he would let go. A dark blue cloak was draped over his shoulders and head obscuring his face from view. Its glossy material shone with droplets of rain reminding Tony of stars on a cloudless night sky. He didn't like this, his gut told him something was about to happen, yet he motioned for them to come inside.

Thor let his wet cape drop to the floor and hugged Loki even closer. The younger god didn't protest, which as far as Stark knew was out of his character, and let himself be hauled to the sofa.

'I am not sure where to begin,' Thor admitted looking lost.

'Maybe at the beginning? When you left us and took Loki back to Asgard?'

'It was as you say Steven. Upon returning home I handed Loki to the guards and they escorted him away. I then went to speak to the All-Father. I told him what transpired on Midgard, but he already knew everything thanks to his faithful ravens' eyes - Hugin and Munin. He then promised he would judge Loki accordingly and justly and that I should not be concerned with him any longer.

There were skirmishes throughout the Nine Realms that demanded my attention and it was my duty as a prince to lead our army to put an end to them and restore peace anew.

Thus I believed in my father's wisdom and left Loki in his hands, thinking that he would be judged fairly, took the Einherjar and with the aid of our sorcerers and the Tesseract, left Asgard. At the time Bifrost was still under construction, so there was no easy path between the realms for me to come back and make sure everything was as it should have been.'

Thor was absentmindedly stroking Loki's long hair. Tony was starting to think it suspicious that the Trickster wouldn't look them in the faces, hiding instead. He was about to ask, but the Thunderer continued his story.

'It was only a short time ago that I had finally returned home and upon my arrival I was immediately confronted by my mother – Queen Frigga. I noticed she looked weary, almost ill and I was alarmed. With haste she took me to her private chambers and told me of Odin's madness. My father would not listen to reason. He was blinded by rage and hatred while devising punishment for my brother. No one was able to appease him, even my mother, who was always his most trusted advisor.

We then hastened together, shrouded from my father's all-seeing gaze, to Loki's cell. And when I laid my eyes upon him... I...' Thor visibly shuddered, but Tony was more focused on Loki. The God of Mischief had become very rigid, was barely breathing, but his shoulders shook with tension.

'It was beyond anything I could have ever imagined. It was barbaric and cruel,' his voice broke

and he hugged Loki closer to his chest. After a moment he recovered enough to continue. With a gentle touch he brushed away a stray strand of hair from Loki's face. He was looking at him with such love and devotion. Tony couldn't understand how, after all that Loki did to Thor, the older god was still able to love him so much. The inventor then glanced at his two companions. Bruce seemed calmer now, probably not turning green anytime soon, and Steve was looking at the brothers with furrowed brows.

Tony was wondering what kind of cruelties could cause a god such distress when he heard Loki's voice.

'No, I shall not!'

'Brother they have to understand,' Thor pleaded.

'I refuse to be a source of amusement for them.'

'Loki please,' The Thunderer then gently directed his brother's face towards them and it really was a huge miracle that Tony didn't puke out his lunch on the spot. Beside him, Bruce abruptly stood up and left the room. On his other side Cap made a strangled noise.

Loki's face was in ruin. His lips were bloody and there was still a piece of a thread hanging from a corner of his mouth. They looked like they have been stitched together. But the upper part was even worse. The skin around his eyes looked like it has melted away. The wound appeared raw and very painful and pus was slowly seeping from his eyes. Which, Tony noticed, were dead... His brilliant, green irises turned grey and milky. When the engineer finally mustered his courage and looked closer, he became certain that Loki was blind. It was a fucking nightmare.

'Does it please you? The Trickster rasped. 'The punishment. Does it please the heroes of Midgard to see their enemy defeated and punished accordingly?' The younger god wanted to push himself away from his brother, but clearly lacked the strength to do so. 'Are you satisfied?' Loki continued. His voice starting to sound manic and he clawed at Thor's arm to be set free. 'Tell me!'

Tony looked at him in horror. Loki's mouth started bleeding again and he was shaking so hard, he could barely stand straight.

'Please stop,' Steve whispered next to Tony. He was looking at Loki with teary eyes.

'Why, dear Captain, does it not appeal to your sense of justice? Should you not applaud Odin All-Father for his choices?' Steve could only shake his head in disbelief. He was rendered speechless.

'Loki enough,' Thor gently tugged at his hand. 'Those Midgardians are honourable, they would not celebrate at seeing you like this.'

The Trickster finally relented and let himself be dragged down to the cushions. Tony's mind was totally blank. He couldn't comprehend how someone could sentence another being to such fate, even more so, his own kin.

It has been over two years since the failed invasion. Has Loki been tortured the whole time? How was he even alive after something like that?

'How...? How did this happen?' he croaked out. Suddenly his throat was drier than a desert.

'He was chained down in a special cell and an enchanted serpent was placed above him to drip venom onto him.' Thor deadpanned.



The thunderstorm outside intensified. Wind howled and rattled the windows as lightning slashed through the grey clouds continuously.

‘Jesus,’ Tony whispered. Steve hid his face in his hands. ‘Couldn’t you have used magic to heal yourself or something?’ He addressed Loki directly for the first time.

‘Whatever for? So the lovely process would start anew? Why waste the energy. Besides our gracious and benevolent ruler made sure it would not be possible,’ the god sneered. He then shoved his sleeve up and extended his arms for them to look at. They were marred with black and intricate markings that covered his porcelain skin from wrist to shoulder and probably also stretched over his torso. They seemed to pulse in rhythm with Loki’s heart (if godly heartbeat was similar to that of a human) and move slightly, like a parasite, still growing underneath his skin. They looked revolting.

‘I am unable to summon my *Seiðr* at will. Those sigils prevent me from doing so and any attempt at spell casting results in immense pain,’ he said with a flat voice, as if the topic wasn’t at all distressing to him. His unseeing eyes moved over them.

‘This must be a happy day for you, to see your hated enemy reduced to a mere shadow of his former glory, now only an empty husk.’

‘Loki please,’ The Thunderer whispered brokenly.

‘Oh Thor, do not deny your shield-brother’s this moment to gloat at my defeat’ Loki mocked. His hands were shaking badly.

Tony felt as if someone froze his insides. It was painful to watch Loki like that.

Of course, he initially wanted him to suffer after the whole failed invasion, but not like that, never like that. It was too much, too cruel. Tony remembered Loki as a proud prince of a foreign world, strutting through his landing pad, their short, witty banter that ultimately ended with Tony thrown out a window. But then Loki was beaming with confidence and pride, back straight and a mocking smirk on his face. This creature before him was anything but that, like a photonegative of that previous Loki. Tormented, exhausted and feral. Even his clothes were plain, just a simple brown tunic and trousers under the blue cloak. He didn’t even have shoes.

Tony took in all that and he felt only pity for the Trickster god and anger at his so-called father. The engineer exhaled audibly.

‘You can stay for as long as you need to. We can accommodate Loki in your suite Thor...’

‘No!’ the younger god protested.

‘...or you can stay in Pepper’s old rooms on my floor. She doesn’t use them anymore.’ Tony was a bit surprised at the Trickster’s outburst. He was clinging to Thor for dear life just a moment ago and now he didn’t want to live with him? ‘Those are the only two options I can give you. All other floors are occupied.’

‘Then I shall take the other set of rooms,’ Loki decided.

Thor looked at him with confusion.

‘Brother I don’t understand... why would you not want to share my chambers. We did so in the past!’

'That is exactly why. I know you well enough to be sure I would not be left alone to my own devices.'

Loki's mask of boredom was back on.

'But...'

'No Thor.'

The Thunderer looked hurt.

'Sooo... it's decided?' Tony asked after a moment of awkward silence. At Thor's nod he rose from his spot and motioned for them to follow. 'Okay then, let me show you the way. Jarvis turn the AC on in Pepper's old rooms for a bit of fresh air, would you?'

'*Certainly sir,*' the AI responded for the first time since the gods' arrival. Thor knew about him, so he wasn't terribly surprised, but Loki flinched while trying to maintain a bored mask on his face.

'Ah, sorry sorry, introductions,' the inventor motioned in a general direction of the ceiling. 'Thor, Loki this is Jarvis. Jarvis, Thor and Loki. They will be staying with us for the time being.'

'*It's a pleasure, sirs.*' The AI responded with his perfect English accent.

Thor nodded back probably confused a little and Loki didn't seem to care to acknowledge him at all.

'A bit of clarification,' Tony continued. 'Jarvis is an AI, as in artificial intelligence. He's a computing system that I created and he manages all my houses and other affairs.'

'*I am your glorified babysitter, sir.*'

'Don't sass me J.' Tony laughed.

'*I would never, sir. Those were Miss Potts' words.*'

'Oh. Anyway, here we are. The sheets probably need changing, but other than that it's habitable.'

Tony opened the doors with a flourish, but the motion was futile since the person who was supposed to live there couldn't even see it. 'This suite consists of three spacious rooms. Here's the lounge, a study to the right and a bedroom to the left with an adjoined bathroom and a walk-in closet. If you need anything ask Jarvis, he can answer all your questions and/or notify me or any other inhabitant if necessary.'

'Thank you Anthony,' Thor flashed him a sad smile. He seemed reluctant to let Loki go. Tony could understand that. When Pepper was moving away after their break up and the shit with Mandarin was dealt with, he also didn't want to let her go.

'Yeah, no problem Blondi. You guys make yourself comfortable here and I will find Bruce to see if he can treat his wounds, okay?' Loki just shrugged. He seemed exhausted. The Thunderer guided him toward the sofa while Tony was leaving. 'Come Steve, I'll give you a fresh set of sheets for him.'

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Tony found Bruce at his private lab, nursing a cup of cold herbal tea. He approached casually making some noise to not startle his friend.



‘You better now?’

‘I don’t know. It’s just so fucked up!’ The scientist raked a hand through his unruly hair.

Well if Bruce was swearing he had to be really shaken. Not that Tony was surprised. His science buddy was a big hug bear at heart.

‘Yeah, tell me about it,’ he sighed loudly and leaned on the nearest table.

‘His own father Tony, Jesus. I shouldn’t feel sympathy for him, but it’s so hard not to in those circumstances.’ Bruce shook his head.

‘And I thought that Howard was bad when he temporally disowned me for blowing up his priced collection of cars.’

Banner chuckled mirthlessly.

‘You did?’

‘I was 9. It was an experiment to see for what he cared more. I then concluded that inanimate objects had more value for him than animated ones.’ The engineer grimaced. ‘Anyway, are you up to give Loki a check-up? He really needs it.’

Bruce swivelled lukewarm tea in his cup and sighed.

‘I think, I can manage.’ After a moment of hesitation he asked quietly. ‘What are we getting ourselves into Tony?’

‘I don’t know buddy. I don’t know, but it will be one hell of a bumpy ride.’ The inventor patted his shoulder and started towards the elevator.

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## Chapter 2

The gods have been in the Tower for nearly a week now, and while Thor was almost a constant presence, Tony haven't seen Loki even once since their arrival. He was assured by Jarvis that the Trickster was in his rooms, and he knew Bruce went there daily to inspect Loki's injuries. But other than that, it was like the god wasn't even here. No sounds, no... nothing.

The first sign that something was not right manifested itself when, on the sixth day, Thor started banging on Loki's door shouting for the younger god to let him in.

After like ten minutes of all that ruckus Tony finally had enough (he was doing paper work, so nothing important, but the constant banging was starting to get on his nerves). He emerged from an opposite end of the corridor connecting both suites together and almost had to shout to be heard over all the noise.

'What the hell are you doing Thor?' The Thunderer finally stopped tormenting Loki's doors and turned to Tony.

'Loki will not let me into his chambers. I am afraid something has happened to him.'

Stark let out an exasperated sigh. Leave it to Loki to cause trouble while doing absolutely nothing.

'Jarvis,' the inventor enquired, 'is Loki in his suite?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And is he alright?' he eyed Thor's worried expression. Well maybe Loki tripped and banged his head on something? Better check to avoid the god's rage.

'*He seems well enough, considering all his previous injuries, sir.*' Jarvis replied helpfully.

'You see, brother bear, nothing to worry about.' Tony patted him on the shoulder. 'Your brother is safe and sound.'

'Then why will he not let me in?' Thor furrowed his brow in confusion. He was clutching a tray with something that looked like a steak and mashed potatoes, but the meat appeared burned a little and the potatoes resembled more a pudding than vegetables. The Thunderer apparently made it himself. Tony wondered, briefly, who showed him how to operate the stove.

'I don't know, maybe he's busy or something?' Or just being his normal little shit – he wanted to add, but bit his tongue in time. It would have earned him a hammer to the face.

Thor was looking at him with his '*miserable kicked puppy*' eyes and Tony almost let out a string of very inventive curses, any sailor would be proud of. Why the hell did he thought Thor would be satisfied with just that.

With another, very deliberate sigh he relented.

'Fine, fine. Move back a little bit.'

Tony knocked softly and listened for any sign of life on the other side of the door, but only silence



answered him. After a moment, when his brain started to supply him with images of Loki's head split open from a collision with a table, he called.

'Loki, can you open the door, so Thor could see that you are alright and maybe stop bending the doorframe with his fists? It would be beneficial us all.'

He then waited and listened for any sound from inside. After another long moment, when Thor was almost convinced ripping the door out would be faster, they opened a crack.

'What do you want?' Loki hissed. He didn't look much better than a week ago, the only visible difference was a lack of fresh blood on his face. Otherwise he was still sickly pale and his obviously unseeing eyes remained cloudy grey, but some wounds started to heal slowly, especially those around his lips.

'Brother!' Thor shouted so loud Tony's eardrums almost gave out. 'Why will you not eat anything? Your condition will only worsen if you continue like that!'

Loki levelled him with a blank stare and said nothing. The engineer noticed the god's room was pitch black. Okay, a blind guy doesn't need light to function, but it was still uncomfortable for Tony to imagine Loki sitting alone in the dark, probably doing nothing, because what was there to do? It must very lonely to live like that. Maybe he could do something about it? If the god would let him, that is.

'Loki please, just do it for me.' Tony knew it was the wrong thing to say the moment it left the Thunderer's mouth.

Loki's back straightened and he literally snarled at Thor.

'For you? For you?! You left me there to rot and never came back! It was you who put me in that prison, never forget that!'

'I never thought...' The older god started.

'Oh no, you never think. You always bash your head against the wall until it crumbles, you never stop to think, to search for other possibilities, other pathways!' Loki shouted.

'Brother...'

'No! I do not need, nor want your pity. Leave me be. I will manage alone as I always do.'

Thor looked as if someone just slapped him in the face. With a baseball bat. He made a step back, then another. 'As you wish,' he whispered and left, shoulders slumped in defeat.

'He's just worried, you know.' Tony glanced at the younger god to gauge his reaction. Loki stood there unblinking, his face a mask of indifference, but Tony noticed his fingers were trembling again.

'I truly do not see how that should concern you, man of iron.'

Tony grimaced. 'Really? You too with "the man of iron"? It's "**Iron Man**" and it does concern me as long as you two stay under my roof, so what the hell was that all about?'

'I do not wish to discuss my affairs with you.' The Trickster was about to close the door, but Tony stopped him.

'Yeah? You don't know me very well then, I can be quite pushy.' Tony then shoved the doors away and invited himself into Loki's suite without ceremony. 'Jarvis give me some light would you?' The AI complied and the room was instantly flooded with soft light.

'What, pray tell are you doing?' Loki asked exasperated.

The engineer shrugged sitting his bottom on one of the couches, but remembered that Loki couldn't see it, he answered instead.

'The sooner we deal with this problem, the better for my property. So talk to me.'

Loki didn't move from his spot at the door. He was momentarily stunned by this mortal's boldness. If he'd been at his full capacity (and he reluctantly had to admit that he was not) he would smite the human without a second thought.

'Well,' Tony prompted, 'is there a specific reason why you refuse to eat, or are you just trying to be obnoxious?'

The god finally recovered and slowly made his way towards the inventor. With an outstretched hand he rounded the couch cursing silently for showing the mortal his weakened state and sat carefully down.

Tony watched him curiously, but refrained from commenting. Loki was practically at their mercy, he was almost defenceless, still getting used to living in the total darkness and lack of sight, when one of his greatest skills was that of observation and silent assessment of his opponents. What would Tony do in his place? It would be impossible for him to be Iron Man then. Of course Jarvis was able to operate the armour if needed, but what would be Tony's job then? He probably still could invent new stuff, yet building it by himself would be out of the question and explaining it to others, so they could create things for him, too pitiful. He would probably go mad, and fast. He didn't envy Loki his fate. **Not one bit.**

He waited for a few minutes for the god to gather his thoughts, displaying a massive amount of patience (sitting still, doing precisely nothing, was something Tony Stark had problems with).

After another long moment, when the only sound one could hear was the silent hum from the city below them, he fidgeted slightly and started to wonder if Loki forgot that he was there. Sighing internally, the engineer decided that the burden of starting the conversation had fallen onto his back.

'Don't tell me the food's that bad. Cap's a decent cook and even I could probably manage to make some pancakes or something,' he joked. He probably would burn the place to the ground while attempting to cook, but hey, nobody's perfect, well except maybe Captain Spangles.

'I was merely being cautious,' the god finally spoke, but he bit his lower lip right away, as if it wasn't his intention to say it out loud.

'Cautious? Of what?' Tony frowned.

'I do not wish to get poisoned.'

'Poisoned?! Why would anybody want to poison you?!' Tony sprang from his seat and started pacing. Loki visibly flinched at that and berated himself for another display of weakness.

'I am your enemy, am I not? And a problem as you so kindly stated. It would be understandable if you would decide to... get rid of that problem.' He finished with a shrug, a mask of indifference



firmly in place.

Tony stopped abruptly and stared at the Trickster. He wasn't being *serious*, was he? 'You're joking right?'

'It would be the simplest course of action in this situation. I am clearly at a disadvantage here and ultimately at your mercy.' His voice sounded flat, but again Tony noticed the minute tremble of his fingers. Was he itching for a weapon, or his magic? The inventor couldn't tell, but it was definitely a nervous gesture, one that Loki probably wasn't even aware of.

'Jesus, Loki no one is going to poison you,' Tony sighed (he did that a lot lately) and flopped back onto the couch again. 'Thor would fucking grind this place to the ground if we'd even think about it. Not that we do!' His head was starting to hurt.

'I could not possibly take you at that word,' the god shrugged again.

'Is it even possible to poison you with anything from Earth?' Loki levelled him with a long, blank stare.

'Probably not. I have been poisoned several times during my life and worked up an immunity to most deadly toxins. Yet the side effects are never pleasant and I would rather avoid them if possible.'

Tony just gapped at him. How was this his life, discussing poisons with the God of Lies?!

'So you were planning on not eating? Like at all? How is that any better?' The inventor flung his arms up in exasperation. He will need a therapist when this all ends.

Loki seem unfazed.

'I am unable to perform my arts to determine if it's safe to eat what I am being offered and lately I had enough pain in my life to not want more. Also I do not require nourishments as often as you mortals apparently do.'

Tony looked at him with sympathy. The guy was tortured for a long time. If Tony has been at his spot... Hell, he has been at his spot. After Afghanistan he also became paranoid that everyone was trying to get him (and some did), so he understood the god's reasoning a little. Yet he couldn't just let him starve himself. It wasn't an option.

'So if I would try everything before you, would you eat it?' That would probably be really inconvenient and awkward in the long run, but Tony didn't really know how to approach this situation.

'I could not be sure that you are not deceiving me...' the Trickster was looking through the big window that span over the entire wall (did he even knew there was a window there? Probably.) It was an early evening, but the sun has set now, the days getting shorter and shorter as the winter approached. Tony could barely hear the sound of traffic many, many floors below.

'Then what would convince you?' the engineer asked resigned. He was starting to think it to be a lost cause.

'I would have your word.' The god shifted in his spot and looked in Tony's direction, his grey irises dull and lifeless.

'What? You would believe what I say, but not what I do?' Loki waved a hand at him.

‘Swear on your honour as a hero and protector of this realm, that no harm would come to me, while I am under your roof and eat what you provide.’

‘If that will make you feel better... I swear on my honour (*or whatever is left of it*, he thought wryly), that no harm will come to you as long as you live here or at any other building I own. Is that good enough?’ Tony felt like a knight in some medieval play, making a promise to his lady love, to slay a dragon for her. He wanted to snort, but thought better of it. Loki could interpret it as mocking, that sensitive bastard.

After all that heart-to-heart the inventor was starting to get hungry himself. Loki said he didn’t have to eat as often as them, but after god knows how long of fasting he was probably starving, yet his stupid pride wouldn’t let him admit to that.

‘I assume you don’t want to leave this floor?’ He glanced at the god. He suddenly looked more relaxed and at ease, as if this simple vow had taken a heavy burden from his shoulders.

‘I would prefer not to just yet. Not until I get more used to my... predicament, yes.’

‘Thought so. Come on. My kitchen isn’t probably that well stocked, but we will find you something to eat.’

Loki gracefully rose from his spot on the sofa. Tony sprang up too, less so, and started moving just to stop abruptly mid-step. *I’m probably going to get defenestrated again for this*, he thought with a hint of amusement.

‘Okay, don’t freak out now Snow White.’

Loki managed only to open his mouth in an attempt to protest, but Tony didn’t leave him time to voice his displeasure. He quickly took the god by the hand and literally dragged towards the kitchen. The Trickster hissed, but resisted only for show. If he really wanted to, there would be no way for Tony to move him even an inch from his spot without the Iron Man suit.

Once there, he carefully guided Loki onto a barstool and busied himself with preparations. The inventor wasn’t really pleased with what he found. Most of the fridge was filled with alcohol, but he found some eggs. He could probably manage something edible for the god. While he searched for salt, his eyes landed on a jar tucked in a corner of one of the cupboards and he smiled widely. Loki was quietly waiting at the kitchen bar behind him. It occurred to him just then that it wasn’t probably very wise to turn your back to the Trickster, especially with sharp objects in his range. Yet Tony was weirdly confident that Loki wouldn’t try anything.

He fished out a tea spoon from a drawer and approached the god.

‘Gimme your hand.’

‘Why?’ The immortal glanced with suspicion in his general direction.

‘Oh come on, I won’t do anything to you. Have some trust!’

‘I do not *trust*, Stark’ Loki almost snarled.

Tony sighed. ‘Please?’ It was worse than handling a child, not that the engineer had any experience with that either.

Loki reluctantly outstretched his right hand, palm up. Tony planted the spoon into it and curled the Trickster’s slim and cool fingers around it.

'Now give me your other hand.' This time it took Loki only a second of hesitation to reach out with his other palm and Tony quickly placed the jar in it.

'You should know, this is... what do you call it? Midgard? This is Midgard's greatest culinary achievement right after pizza, but that we'll cover some other time.'

'What is this?' The god shifter Tony's offering closer to himself and sniffed it cautiously. He didn't throw it away so that was a plus.

'It's called Nutella and it's made from cocoa, sugar, milk and hazelnuts. Try it, you'll like it.' The inventor moved away and started preparing ingredients for Loki's dinner, if you could call that scrambled eggs and toasts, but they had to make do.

'And it is to be eaten straight from this container? Like some peasant?' Loki looked puzzled.

'Hey, it's the best way! Well, I could make you a sandwich, but it's not the same, and then we would have to go through a long debate about pros and cons of adding butter to the sandwich and trust me, you don't want that.' Stark smiled cracking a few eggs on the pan and hissed when some butter landed on his hand. He stirred it and threw away the shells while attempting not to make a mess out of the countertop. He left the pan and went for the toasts.

After a loaded pause Loki dipped his spoon into the chocolate spread and slowly lifted it to his mouth, then licked it off swiftly. Tony was instantly distracted by his pink tongue and swallowed audibly. Behind him, the toaster pinged sharply, making the inventor jump up, startled.

Meanwhile Loki devoured another spoonful and was looking very pleased.

'Good?'

'It's... different. We don't have anything like that on Asgard or even Alfheim. I like the sweetness.' The Trickster inclined his head.

'Oh yeah? Jarvis, add 'Yoghurt flavoured Milka and maybe White one too to the grocery list. Also remind me to buy some candy bars.'

'Yes, sir.'

'You know,' Tony looked thoughtfully at the god. 'Maybe I should make you a hot cocoa? I think you'll enjoy it.'

Loki just shrugged, he was totally absorbed by his Nutella.

'Okay! One hot cocoa and scrambled eggs with toasts, coming right up! Jarvis make me coffee, we have some cooking to do!'

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## Chapter 3

*He was standing in his battered armour, bloody and grinning madly, in front of a familiar figure. His captive was slumped, chained arms straining to hold his weight. He was barely conscious, breathing shallowly and haggard from all the torture he was subjected to. Tony bend forward, mad grin still in place, brushed a few dark and bloody strands of hair out of his victim's face and giving him a look of appraisal.*

*'I like you like that, you know. All submissive and spent.'*

*He patted Loki's cheek and smeared some blood over it.*

*'It's a good look.'* Stark hummed approvingly.

*The god didn't answer. His meadow-green eyes were glazed from pain. The chains chimed charmingly in rhythm with Loki's trembling limbs.*

*The inventor leaned back and took in the whole scene. He was pleased, oh so very pleased with this outcome, this opportunity to study a foreign species, to learn new and exciting things. It felt ecstatic!*

*'Are you enjoying yourself?' Tony asked the broken god. Without waiting for an answer he placed a gloved hand to a wound on the immortal's chest and discharged a repulsor blast.*

*'Because I am. **Immensely!**' He laughed while Loki screamed.*

Tony woke up with a gasp. The blue digital numbers on his clock indicated it was 6:34 in the morning. The engineer groaned and hid his face between two fluffy pillows. Three fucking nightmares in one night.

'A goddamn record,' he growled.

After a moment Stark turned onto his back and stared unblinkingly at the ceiling for a long time. He was absolutely certain he would not be able to fall asleep again tonight and with good reason. The first two nightmares were standard by now: Ten Rings turning into Chitauri, turning into Extremis soldiers, with a few variations in between. Tony has to fight his way out, he fails, the suit

fails, someone dies and he wakes up. Same old, same old. But the third dream... It was new and fucked up beyond all reason.

The engineer was baffled how his brain could even come up with shit like that. Torture? Really? He felt bile rising in his throat at a mere thought of it. And the glee he felt... *Jesus*, he was so fucked up.

'Jarvis invent a way to bleach my brain, will you? I don't want to think anymore.' Tony groaned.

*'I don't think that's wise sir. You may still need it in the future.'*

'I highly doubt it,' he muttered. It was too early to be drinking, for sure, so what else could he do at this god awful hour to distract himself?

'Jarv is anyone up yet? Bruce, Steve?'

*'Doctor Banner just went to sleep an hour ago and Captain Rogers is currently in the communal kitchen, sir.'*

'Perfect. Tell him I'll be right there.'

He jumped out of bed and went into his spacious bathroom for a quick, hot shower, dressed himself in *'I'm working and I don't give a single fuck about your opinion of fashion'* clothes and went to find Steve.

~

The good Captain just finished brewing coffee when Tony emerged from the hallway.

'Hi Cap! Is that for me, because I really need it right now.' The billionaire eyed the mug Steve was holding.

'Good morning and yes. You know I don't drink my coffee black.' He then pushed the mug towards the inventor. 'Careful, it's hot.'

'I don't care.' Tony took a gulp and almost dropped the mug when its contents burned his throat. His eyes watered instantly from the assault and he almost spat the coffee back.

'I told you,' Steve sighed and shook his head. Tony would never change, he was always so reckless. The soldier looked closer at his friend and frowned. He seemed stressed, his shoulders were rigid with tension and his eyes darted from one corner of the kitchen to another, as if anticipating an ambush or some other kind of attack. Lately he was more relaxed and now this.

'Is something the matter? He asked after a moment.

'Nothing.' Stark answered swiftly, too swiftly for his liking. Something must have happened. Was it the God of Mischief? They were sharing a floor, maybe there was an incident between them.

'Tony, it's not even 7 am. You never get up so early unless... unless you had a nightmare.' He more stated than asked. It made sense. Tony was distressed and jumpy. Normally he could hide it better, so it must have been really bad this time.

'So I had one, not a big deal. They are like old and obnoxious friends to me now... always visiting uninvited.' He waved a hand dismissively, but the truth was the last one had shaken him more than

he was willing to admit to himself. He could still hear his own insane laughter and the chime of chains binding Loki... A shiver ran over his spine. He so wished for a drink right now, or preferably a whole bottle, but knew that *The Disapproving Look* of Steve's would burn holes in his scalp. So he had to settle for another cup of coffee.

'Do you have anything planned for now?' The soldier asked out of the blue. Tony looked at him with suspicion.

'No...why?'

'Come, spar with me. It will take your mind off other things.' Steve smiled encouragingly.

The inventor thought about it for a moment, weighing pros and cons, then shrugged.

'You know what, I might just take you on that offer.'

~

It was probably a grievous mistake to spar with Steve just after waking up and so early to boot. Tony's body hurt in more places than he could count and he was really good at math.

They were at it for hours. It's not that Tony was a weakling without his armor, but he lacked protection its gold-titanium alloy plates offered when he miscalculated and got punched, or thrown, or kicked.

After forming the Avengers they took extra time to spar together, just like that, so the engineer could pick up more fighting techniques beside boxing. It ultimately paid off, even if at first he was whining and complaining every time someone (be it Steve, Natasha or Clint) beat his ass and he was nursing bruises the size of Hulk's fist.

Now he was more adapt at hand-to-hand combat, but compared to Steve and his super soldier serum and training, he was still too slow. But thanks to his observation skills and quick brain he was able to dodge or deflect a lot of his opponent's attacks and land a few of his own. Maybe not so much with Nat, she was a fucking master of concealing her intentions and infinitely harder to read than the Captain or the Hawk.

*Just like Loki was.*

With that thought in mind Tony got punched straight in the face by Steve's perfect right super fist. The move, more of a smoke screen for another attack, was very easy to read, so they were both surprised when Tony hit the mat with a loud 'umf', his nose bleeding profoundly.

'Oh my god! Tony I'm so sorry! I thought you saw that coming from a mile away.'

The soldier crouched next to him, his hands hovering right above the inventor's face. Stark was splayed on the floor, dizzy from shock. He tried to suppress the flow of blood, but when he pinched his nose, a sharp stab of pain pierced his skull. Tony groaned.

'It's alright. It was my fault, I got distracted.'

He got up slowly, the bells still ringing in his ears.

'I think, it's my cue to leave. Uh, let's pray the nose's not broken, ladies would be devastated.' He

chuckled lamely while trying to get up without bleeding on every available surface. Finally, and with only a little help from Steve, he managed to drag himself to the elevator and press the button for Bruce's floor.

'Jarvis is Bruce awake yet?'

*'Yes sir, he just got up. Shall I notify him of your arrival?'* The AI asked.

'Yeah, you do that buddy. Tell him we're on our way now.'

~

As it happened, his nose was indeed broken, but at this point Tony didn't care anymore, the day started shitty anyway, so why would it improve now. Steve apologized over ten times to him and it was starting to get really annoying at this point, so he fled to his workshop, where he could be left alone.

He was tinkering with one of his StarkPads, to take his mind away from stupid thoughts, the harmless way, when Jarvis' concerned voice sounded over Ozzy's 'Diary of a Madman'.

*'Sir, I think mister Laufeyson may need your assistance.'*

'Hm? What happened? Did he trip over something?' Tony didn't stop poking at the tablet's insides, but a spark of uneasiness bloomed in his chest.

*'His body temperature just now dropped critically low sir, and he's showing signs of a panic attack.'* The AI summarized hastily.

Tony dropped his tools and ran to the elevator. Jarvis opened the doors even before the engineer pressed the button.

'Take me to him.' He ordered as worry squeezed his insides.

The inventor was out of the box before its doors even opened fully and almost smashed his nose again when he hastily pulled the wing of Loki's suite's door too forcefully and they almost flew from their hinges. Right, Jarvis unlocked them for him.

As he entered, the lights instantly flooded the lounge and Tony spotted the god on the floor, next to a broken coffee table. He wondered briefly, whose brilliant idea was it to leave a fucking glass table in a blind's god apartment. Probably his. Great work Tony, pat yourself on the back.

He crouched next to the Trickster and noticed that he was hyperventilating and shaking again. Panic attacks Tony knew well enough, in his time, he experienced a shit load of them.

'Loki, hey Loki! Look at me! Ah shit, you can't, sorry...' He wanted to smash himself in the face, with a brick, multiple times. 'Can you hear me through? Do you recognize my voice?'

The god hid his face on his knees and refused to answer. It was the second time Tony saw him at his most vulnerable, yet it never crossed his mind to think him weak, even now when he was heaving brokenly for air.

'Hey, hey Loki, I'm here, you are not alone.' The inventor touched his shoulder gently, but the god



jerked violently to avoid the contact. Tony instantly moved his hand away, yet he noticed, just as Jarvis said before, that the Trickster's body temperature was really low. That was definitely not a good sign.

'I know I'm an annoying bastard, but try breathing slower. You... you're safe here, you're not alone.' He sat right next to the god, but made sure not to touch him again. His presence alone had to be enough for now.

'I'm here, you know: the Mighty Iron Man! Hero of Earth? And Jarvis is here. You are here, are you not buddy?' Tony was starting to babble, worried that Loki still didn't show any signs of recognition.

'Yes, I am here, sirs.' Jarvis answered, his voice calm and collected.

'You hear that? You are not alone and no one is going to hurt you, so please, please say something and... and try to breath slowly, in and out, in and out, in through your nose and out through your mouth, in through your no...'

'Please cease your babbling, my head will split from your pointless chatter.' The god finally spoke, his voice muffled by his hands. Tony chuckled nervously at that.

'Sorry, it's a defense mechanism for when I'm stressed. You better now?' He asked with concern.

Loki fidgeted, but didn't lift his head to face him. After a short pause Tony heard a quiet 'Yes.'

'Good, good. That's great.' He breathed out in relief.

After that they just sat there for a few minutes in almost comfortable silence while Loki tried to compose himself. Tony reflected upon his own panic attacks which haunted him after he dived to the other side of the Universe through a fucking space portal and witnessed what the void looked like. Eventually they stopped, but at the beginning, when they were frighteningly frequent he was almost always alone and had no one to help him fight them. Of course there was Pepper and Rhodey, but he didn't want to burden them with his paranoias, so he never said anything. It was always only him and Jarvis.

He didn't know what caused Loki's attack, but he was determined to find out and maybe try to help him if he could. Yet, asking: *Hey, you wanna talk about it?* seemed so lame, he couldn't bring himself to say it.

Tony was still debating how to breach the subject when Jarvis' voice disturbed the silence.

'Sir, mister Odinson is approaching.'

'You want to see him?' Stark asked the god quickly. When Loki's answer came in a firm head shake Tony commanded Jarvis. 'Tell him Loki is sleeping and it would be better to leave him alone.'

'Yes sir,' and after a moment, *He went away, sir.*

'Thanks J.'

'For you sir, always.' The AI replied smoothly. Tony chuckled then glanced at Loki.

'How are you now? Can you show me your face, 'cause your hands are bleeding and I wanna check if you didn't hurt your face too.' The Trickster's body jerked and slowly he untangled his slim arms from around his knees and faced the engineer.

The billionaire inhaled sharply. After almost two weeks of living with the gods, Tony was starting to get used to seeing Loki's damaged eyes. He took upon himself the task of feeding the god, because he still refused to eat anything if he wasn't sure from where it came from. When Tony explained that to Thor, the older god eyed him suspiciously, but let him continue, Loki's wellbeing at the forefront of his mind.

But something else captured Stark's attention now; a smear of blood on the God's of Mischief cheek. At first glance it seemed trivial, because there was no wound or any visible skin damage, yet its placement was almost identical to the one in his nightmare. Tony's brain reared from the memory as if burned.

'Fuck, why now?' The inventor swore under his breath.

'I cannot control when terrors invade my slumber Stark.' Loki hissed and tried to move away, but Tony reflexively caught his wrist and released it almost immediately, remembering the god's earlier reaction to his touch. The Trickster slumped back down.

'No, no I know. It's just that I remembered something from a nightmare of my own...'

'You also had a night terror?' Loki shifted closer to him. He seemed interested and well, Tony could use that to maybe understand the fallen god a little better. He obviously couldn't tell him what he dreamed about, it would earn him a sharp shard of the broken glass surrounding them to his jugular. The other two he could share, with some omissions of course.

'Yeah. They are less frequent now than two years ago, when uh... you visited and it kinda took me by surprise, you know, the intensity of it. It was as if, after such a long time, it came with a triple force.' The inventor tried to explain. Now that he thought more about it, it seemed true. The third dream felt somehow odd, except of course the whole torture thing, that was fucked up in itself, but the feelings and the intensity of his emotions, it felt somehow more real and scary because of that.

He heard Loki's breath hitch and the god became instantly tense. Tony glanced his way and noticed that his hands were trembling again. The engineer had an inexplicable urge to take those bony hands into his and rub some warmth into them, but with a lot of effort resisted. Instead he placed his own hands on his knees.

'At what time was it?' The immortal almost stuttered and it made Tony glance at him again.

'Around 6 am, I think. Why?'

'Jarvis,' the Trickster suddenly called, causing Stark to lift a brow in surprise. 'When was my first... incident today?'

'*Around the same time as mister Stark's, sir.*' The AI replied almost instantly, as if he knew something more about this situation. Tony had to question him later.

'What are you implying?' he asked the god, an uneasy feeling in his gut.

Loki's hand shot out, gripped the inventor's forearm and shook hard. 'What did you dream about Stark?' The god urged. He was starting to breath faster again and his iron grip would definitely bruise Tony's arm.

'You! I dreamed about you!' He almost shouted, startled by this sudden reaction. Loki instantly stilled, his grey eyes tried to focus on the engineer's face and failed. '...I dreamed about you. In chains. I... I was torturing you.' Tony admitted quietly. Guilt and self-loath burned his stomach with acid at a mere thought of that nightmare.

'No.' the god whispered and finally let go on his arm. He left a remarkable hand impression there. 'It cannot be. It should not possible.'

'Uh sorry, it was just a dream. I would never...!' He was feeling more and more miserable the longer they drawled on this topic. The Trickster worried his lower lip between his teeth and seemed to consider his next step. At last he said.

'It would seem Tony Stark, that I had unconsciously influenced your dreams. It was not your dream to dream. It was mine. Apparently the All-Father's bindings were not enough to prevent my *Seiðr* from reaching out to you and poisoning your dreams with my terrors.'

'That... that was yours?' The inventor's eyes went wide. 'Was that a memory Loki? Was that the reason you freaked out today? Those memories?'

'You presume much Stark.' The Trickster growled, their faces suddenly inches apart. Tony gasped, startled from the unexpected proximity, but didn't move away. Loki's brows furrowed.

'Did I injure you earlier?' He asked confused.

'What? No, no you didn't. Why?'

'I can feel blood on you.' The god's hand shot towards his face and gentle, searching fingers brushed his cheek.

'It's probably all yours,' Tony looked himself over, but didn't spot any injuries or blood, for the matter. Was Loki losing it?

'I can **smell it**, you imbecile and it is definitely not mine. And why pray tell do you speak so oddly?' Loki's deft fingers brushed his mouth, moved over his chin, then fell away. Another weird urge overcome Tony and he fought against himself to not kiss the Trickster's delicate finger pads. It was so unlike him to have thoughts like that. It never happened before, not even with Pepper, when they were still together.

'Oh!' The inventor exclaimed. From all that happened today he totally forgot about his gym accident. 'Steve broke my nose today during sparring.'

'He did what?!' The god cried out then shook his head. 'You mortals are so fragile.'

'It's nothing.' Tony waved his hand dismissively. 'It will heal.'

'I am sure it will.' Loki said, then his cool fingers were back on Tony's face. The fingertips brushed past his lips again, then traversed towards a left cheek, then brow, to finally settle lightly on the bridge of his nose. The inventor didn't even notice when he closed his eyes, prompted by the feather light touch of the other's hand. 'I must warn you, this may feel uncomfortable. I am not in full control of myself now.'

Tony was just about to say something cheeky when a weird sensation assaulted his senses. A tingle under his skin was replaced by an annoying itch, but when he reflexively scrunched his nose it didn't hurt at all.

The billionaire opened his eyes in time to see the god's retreating palm.

'Did you just heal me?' he asked incredulous, patting his nose and staring cross-eyed at it.

'It is but a small recompense for your generosity towards me. A generosity you did not have to extend. Also it was an experiment to see how restrictive the All-Father's sigils are. I was not certain if it would work at all.' The immortal explained.

'Yeah, don't mention it. So I was your guinea pig? And I thought you couldn't use magic.'

'I do not understand why would I need for you to be a pig, it does not matter what form you assume for me to heal your wound. And I also was not aware of the binding's limitations, but you proved me wrong earlier and now I confirmed that I can use small amounts of *Seiðr* for a simple healing spell.'

The inventor nodded and then remembered Loki's words from their first day here.

'Wasn't that supposed to hurt like hell? The magic?' he asked, curiously looking at Loki for any signs of discomfort, but the god seemed calm now. On the other hand, he wasn't called the God of Lies for nothing.

Said god shrugged nonchalantly.

'It is not a spell designed to bring harm, so the rules regarding my usage of *Seiðr* cannot be applied here. I am strictly forbidden from harming, yet I thought that any other spell craft would be lost for me as well. It seems I was mistaken.'

'So what can you do? Can you heal yourself?'

'No, that is not possible.' The god only shook his head, then leaned his back more comfortably against the sofa. They were still sitting among shards of glass from the broken coffee table. 'I would have to study, but I assume it is not much. Probably simple spells with low cost. Like... Oh! Yes, this could work.'

Loki stood abruptly and closed his eyes. Tony followed him with his gaze. The god then started walking. Slowly at first, careful not to collide with any furniture, then with more confidence. A small smile bloomed on his lips. When he walked past the inventor, Tony suddenly felt a cold gust of air envelope him.

'What are you doing? He asked with a smile of his own. It was contagious.

'I am sending out small waves of *Seiðr* to help me orientate myself in this room.' The God of Mischief looked at him and another cold wave of air hit him straight in the chest. It wasn't an unpleasant feeling.

Tony burst out laughing.

'Echolocation! You're like a bat, sending sound waves to avoid flying into things on its path. You... Oh my god! You're Batman!' The inventor started laughing in earnest then. Tears burst out of the corners of his eyes and he was heaving for air. 'Oh god, I can imagine you in that get-up!' He was lying on the floor laughing his ass off, while Loki traversed the rooms with a newfound ease.

'I do not understand that reference Stark, so you can stop laughing.' The god said haughtily, but he was in a better mood now, so he didn't particularly mind the mortal's behavior. Actually he was



smirking faintly too.

Tony finally managed to calm himself enough to climb to the sofa and heave himself up.

‘Okay, okay **Batsy**.’ He inhaled deeply, a wide grin still plastered to his lips. ‘I think it’s time for me to clean up the glass.’ He then eyed all the small shards littering the floor. ‘Jarvis! Where the hell can I find a broom?’

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 4

‘What is that?’

‘What?’ Tony asked, his mouth full.

‘The thing you are eating. It produces a disgusting sound.’ Loki explained gesturing vaguely towards the inventor.

‘Oh! You mean the cereal?’ He picked up the box and started reading. ‘Those are called “*Lucky Charms*.” They’re chocolate flavoured and made from grain, and there are marshmallows in there too, in different shapes! It’s all very sweet.’

The god didn’t look convinced.

*‘They also contain a variety of vitamins and minerals’.* Jarvis interjected. *‘Zinc and iron (mineral nutrients), vitamin C (sodium ascorbate), B vitamin (niacinamide), vitamin B6 (pyridoxine hydrochloride), vitamin B2 (riboflavin), vitamin B1 (thiamin mononitrate), vitamin A, vitamin B12, vitamin D.’* The AI finished in his digitalized voice.

‘Thanks J,’ Tony grimaced. ‘We get it, they’re very vitaminly.’

Loki shot him a disapproving look. ‘You mortals put many strange ingredients into your meals.’

‘Well at least it tastes good.’ The engineer shrugged and helped himself to another spoonful of sweet treats. Loki meanwhile ate his fruit salad with yoghurt. Tony was getting better at guessing what the god would eat and what was still too odd or novel for him.

*‘The producer advertises them as: ‘Lucky Charms! They’re magically delicious!’* Jarvis intoned in the leprechaun’s voice.

Tony almost choked on his coffee. ‘Jarvis warn a guy, geez.’

‘You humans use magic to produce food with enchantments of luck?’ The immortal asked confused.

‘Oh god, no.’ Stark snorted while wiping coffee from his now ruined vintage t-shirt. ‘Not many people here on Earth know how to do the stuff you do.’ He waved his hands around frantically to emphasize Loki’s hocus-pocus, but it was unnecessary as usual, because the god couldn’t see it. ‘Oh, about that. Would you let me scan your sonar magic?’

Loki froze for a second, one hand suspended mid-air, half way to his lips, a clover marshmallow between his slender, elegant fingers. He recovered quickly, but Tony noticed nevertheless.

'Why?' The God of Mischief asked, his unseeing eyes narrowing with suspicion.

'Nothing malicious, I swear,' Tony threw some more cereal into his bowl and pushed it closer to Loki, so the god could try different marshmallows. 'I'm just curious, you know, how it all works and how the hell you can defy the laws of physics with just your mind.' He then stood, picking up the box to put it away while giving Loki time for the words to sink in and let him decide if he trusted the inventor enough to allow him access to his gifts.

'I suppose if the knowledge is for you alone, I can concede to that, but only if the results of those scans are guarded well and are for your eyes only.'

'Great! Jarvis will be responsible that, just like he does with all my data and projects.' Tony rubbed his hands in excitement.

*'Most certainly sir.'*

'Now that formalities are out of the way, let's go do some science!'

~

Loki didn't think it would be this difficult to maintain a steady supply of *Seiðr* for all those scans Stark mentioned. The All-Father's markings were getting increasingly more annoying and the simple spell started to exhaust him more than he would like to admit. Yet the mortal wanted more. A single burst of power was too short for his equipment to pick up so he demanded a longer demonstration, then on a different wave length, then on a lower one, then higher. After an hour Loki was almost swaying from the strain, but he was too prideful to admit that a basic spell could drain him so. Before the punishment he wouldn't even notice any change whatsoever. Now his head hurt and his muscles started to tremble and ache. It must have shown, because suddenly Stark's warm palm was on his shoulder. Startled, he shook it off immoderately.

'Uh, sorry. You seemed to be far away with your thoughts. You okay?' The concern in Stark's voice was palpable.

Loki just hummed noncommittally and moved away, almost colliding with a worktable, too exhausted to even try to cast the energy waves again.

'Whoa there! Shit, I overexerted you, didn't I? You should have said something. I get distracted by data pretty easily, so some things need to be hammered into my head. Wait, bad choice of words. I don't want Thor's hammer anywhere near my head.'

Tony grabbed the Trickster's forearm and started guiding him towards the only sofa in the workshop, but the god roughly freed himself from the human's grasp.

'Don't do that.' Loki hissed.

'Sorry, sorry. I just wanted...'

'I know what you wanted Stark, it is not needed.' The god listed dangerously to the side and almost walked straight into another bench. Tony considered letting him, but quickly discarded that thought and this time caught him by the shoulder. He was shoved back a second later with a snarl.

'Stop touching me!' Loki growled dangerously, but Tony thought he heard a note of desperation in his voice. The god finally managed to reach the sofa and promptly collapsed onto it.

'I've noticed earlier...' The engineer started hesitantly, not sure how to approach this topic. It was

probably a fucking minefield crawling with scorpions and snakes, and cockroaches. Cockroaches were everywhere. He was too curious though, and intrigued by the god for his own good.

Stark came closer to the sofa, but not so close that Loki could lash out at him if he fucked up and asked the wrong questions. He wet his lips nervously, absentmindedly massaging his left elbow which had a close encounter with a sharp edge during their short scuffle.

‘You didn’t react like that the first time we met. What else happened at that fucked up place somewhere over the rainbow?’

The broken god turned away as he tried to school his expression into a blank mask. He almost succeeded, but Tony learned to read him just a little during their time together.

He was quiet for a long time. The inventor waited patiently, not wanting to disturb his wandering thoughts. Finally when he spoke, his voice was almost fully controlled.

‘I fought,’ were his first words and the pride that he spoke them with was great. ‘You think I would let Odin bind me without a fight? I was not helpless, even in chains. The All-Father’s warriors thought me argr, they never saw me as anything else as a lowly mageling. My voice was silenced, so they thought me defeated and obedient. When Odin’s laughable idea of a just verdict reached my ears I taught them how wrong they were. I would never be subjugated, willingly giving away the source of my power. So I fought relentlessly for days. Killed many, maimed even more, but inevitably I had to succumb to tiredness and they saw the chance to overwhelm me. When Odin the War Scavenger was feasting with his court I was being mercilessly shown that in some situations you just cannot win with wit alone. Eventually I was unable to move, let alone defend myself any longer, and only then the All-Father saw fit to grace us with his divine presence and put those loathsome sigils upon my flesh.’

Loki went silent after his revelation, probably reminiscing.

The inventor was astounded. He was not able to imagine how someone could be so stupid to think of Loki as weak and defenceless. The guy was fucking indestructible. Even after all the shit he went through he was still here, wasn’t he?

Not to mention Odin Shit-Father’s way of handling things. For fuck’s sake Loki was faced with such treatment from his own parent! No wonder the god was so paranoid.

With every detail of this so called asgardian justice Tony felt more and more inclined to build a portal himself so he could just go to Asgard and punch Odin in the dick. He would take Bruce with him too, just so Hulk could teach him what it feels like to be smashed by somebody.

The engineer sat heavily next to Loki, mindful not to touch him again. The god shifted slightly so he could better face the human. Tony noticed he didn’t move away again. He was glad about it. It showed that Loki was starting to get more comfortable around him.

‘You know, no one is going to hurt you here. I promised you that.’ The human sighed. He wanted for Loki to heal not only physically, but mentally as well, if it was even possible. The Trickster was screwed up more than he and that was not a small achievement.

‘I understand you believe that, but not everything always goes as one may wish. It may be beyond your reach to protect me. You stand no match against the All-Father, even if, by some chance, the other Avengers would agree to aid you, something I do not see happening.’

Loki just shrugged. He was so sure nobody would help him it made the engineer sad, because even



he had those few friends he could rely on. And Tony was positive that Steve and Bruce would help if asked. Thor would surely be the first to stand beside his brother, even if it meant defying his father and king (he was the one who smuggled Loki here in the first place, so go figure). He was not so sure about Clint and Natasha. The redhead probably would be more inclined to help than not, if it meant not facing Loki in another battle (and a nice hard liquor, courtesy of Tony would probably help even more to convince her). Barton on the other hand was hard to predict. After all that shitstorm with the Chitauri he outright refused to talk about his time under Loki's influence. It was a sore topic and they all knew it. Tony dreaded the day when the assassin duo would return from their latest mission. Oh, it's gonna be so much fun explaining them all of this. Maybe he should wear his armour for that occasion, it might prove useful.

'Well I would try anyway.' He said stubbornly.

For a moment they sat in awkward silence, both lost in their grim thoughts. Abruptly Tony felt a cold gust of wind envelope him, then pleasantly cool fingers caressed his cheek.

'Thank you,' Loki whispered, suddenly much closer than before. Tony placed his hand over his and squeezed.

'Even you need someone whom you can trust.'

'Trust is a dangerous gift to give Tony Stark. I have learned to use it sparingly.' Loki's hand lingered a second longer, then vanished.

Tony wanted to grab it again, but controlled himself.

*'Data compilation complete.'* Jarvis voice broke the moment.

'Oh! Finally. Show me J. What do we have here?' Tony jumped up excited and moved towards the console.

*'On the full-scale hologram sir?'* The AI asked politely.

'Yeah, let's go big.' Tony clapped his hands and instantly the room went dark, then a second later a green hologram appeared in the centre of the workshop. It was an exact replica of Loki, pacing in a small circle. In a lighter shade, almost lime green, Jarvis displayed the god's magic, fluctuating around his body in short intervals.

'Ok Jarvis, start the simulation.'

Suddenly holoLoki started strolling through the entire available floor space, just like the real one an hour before. This time Tony was able to see exactly how those magic waves behaved. They were indeed very similar to ripples made on water, bouncing between objects and fading when they drifted too far away from the epicentre that was the god's body. However the energy levels were very unstable... Interesting.

The inventor started comparing data from all the scans he acquired today. There was a lot to go through, and Tony, fascinated with his new toy quickly got lost in his land of science.

'Jarvis music.' He ordered at some point and the workshop was instantly flooded with loud music. So loud in fact he didn't hear the Trickster's shout. He was jerked back to reality by a hard shove from the god.

'What?' When he couldn't hear the answer he ordered his AI to lower the volume. 'You were saying?' He addressed Loki when he was sure he would hear his answer this time.

'What in the Nine Realms was that infernal sound?'

'Music,' Tony deadpanned. 'In fact the best music there is. You can always count on AC/DC.'

'You call that music? Even the fire giants from the blazing depths of Muspelheim can produce a better sound than this.' The god grimaced.

Tony laughed at that - sincerely, probably for the first time since the gods arrival.

'Okay genius, so what type of music do you like?' He observed how the Trickster's features softened and a small, genuine smile appeared on his lips.

'My mother used to sing the greatest Eddas to us when we were young, me and Thor. He would always run around dancing in an imaginary fight against some great foe from a story she wove.'

'And you would sit in her lap with awestruck eyes?' The inventor laughed again. He could totally picture it. One blond-haired kid with a well-used wooden sword bouncing here and there chasing shadows, while the other, smaller one, pale and probably very delicate, just like a porcelain doll, would sit still, big, green eyes following his mother's every gesture and expression.

They always were different, Tony thought. Thor and Loki, just like sun and moon. Each shone brightly in their own environment, but the sun would outshine its sibling when they both appeared on the same sky. Yet when the moon would rise at night, surrounded by myriads of brilliant stars, it was the most beautiful sight.

Tony stared at Loki's pale face. Even covered in scars the god was very handsome. It was a shame those emerald eyes of his were now grey and dull. At this particular moment the engineer wished for nothing more than to see their extraterrestrial colour again. He looked at his holoLoki still slowly pacing between workbenches. Its eyes were green like the whole hologram, but the colour was nowhere near the one he wanted to see.

'Stark?' Loki's voice brought him back to reality with a jolt.

'Uuh? Yeah, what?'

'You did not hear a single thing I said did you not?' The Trickster did not approve.

'No, no I heard everything! You were talking about your mother, and that she used to sing to you...'

'That was some minutes ago. Then I said that I recall a piece of music pleasant to the ear, which somewhat resembled melodies our skalds used to entertain the court with. Yet I do not know what it was called and the instruments used to play it are not known to me.' Loki explained annoyed he had to repeat himself.

'Okay... That's not much. You remember anything else?'

'It was not long before our first meeting, in the city called Stuttgart.'

'Oh, where I kicked your ass?' Tony chuckled at the memory and Loki just hissed annoyed.

'I let you do that. It was part of the plan.' He said haughtily, nose high up with dignity.

'Sure Bambi,' Tony laughed again. 'So Stuttgart, Jarvis do we have surveillance from that event?'

'No sir. All records were confiscated by S.H.I.E.L.D.' The AI answered.

‘Hack’em. You know you don’t even have to try hard to breach their defences. Shield, my ass. Their security protocols are from the middle ages.’ Tony waved dismissively. Fury was always well... furious when he hacked them, but it was so easy he just couldn’t resist. He usually left some kind of prank code, nothing really dangerous, but it always made the Director livid. This time however he didn’t want the pirate to know of Loki’s stay in the Tower, so they had to be extra careful not to draw unwanted attention.

‘And Jarvis, be gentle. We don’t want Fury breathing on our necks first thing in the morning tomorrow.’

*‘Yes sir.’*

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 5

'You think it's possible?' Tony asked. He was sitting cross-legged on one of Bruce's many clean and shiny work tables. In fact he has been loitering there for over an hour now, exchanging ideas with the good doctor about Loki's condition and a possible cure. Lately he has become very determined to find one.

'A transplant? No, I don't think so Tony. Just think about it for a minute. We know close to nothing about Loki's physiology, or his healing factor, or if his body works even remotely similar to ours.'

'Well, his blood is red.' Tony supplied and shrugged when Bruce shot him a condescending look.

'It would do him more harm than good. In a best case scenario we'd get his hopes up and then it wouldn't work. In the worst, I don't even want to know what complications he'd have to suffer through, and I am positive his body would outright reject the transplant in the first place. Even with all the meds we'd have to pump into his veins it'd be probably very hard to just sedate him, and if his healing powers are as strong as I think they are, he would probably start healing during the procedure.' Bruce massaged his temples; a new headache was definitely approaching.

'Okay, okay! I get it. It wouldn't work. I just... It's just hard to watch him struggle, you know.' The inventor jumped from his seat and started pacing around.

'I know Tony. I'm sorry, but there is nothing medicine can offer him that might work. Claiming otherwise is just delusional and would only bring him false hope. Loki wouldn't thank us for it.'

'Yeah, he would be pissed.' Stark snorted. 'And I don't even wanna know what Thor would do. How is he by the way? I haven't seen him lately.'

This time it was Bruce who snorted.

'You've been holed up in your workshop for days now, it's no wonder. What are you working on anyway?'

The scientist sighed and started to clean his equipment. Tony was too distracting with all his pent-up energy and Bruce's experiments were too delicate for mistakes. He observed the inventor over his glasses. Stark became really attached to the God of Mischief. At first they were worried with Steve that Loki would somehow try to exploit that, but it soon became clear the god was almost equally dependent on Tony. He would refuse any offer of food if it didn't come from the engineer. He talked almost exclusively with him. To Bruce and Steve Loki was polite and always answered when asked a question directly, but other than that there weren't many common topics for them to share. With Thor Loki was distant, not outright cold as he was before, but he wasn't really



forthcoming either. Overall he preferred to stay out of their way.

'Ah, this and that.' Bruce snapped from his musings at Tony's reply. 'Loki's been explaining things about his powers and we've ran some tests. You know the usual stuff, nothing major.'

The scientist couldn't believe his ears.

'You let Loki into your workshop?' He asked incredulous. 'And he lets you study him?'

'Sure,' Stark just shrugged like it was normal to have a deranged god as his personal guinea pig. 'The guy's bored, and it's a distraction. Besides, when you really listen to what he has to say you can learn pretty cool stuff. For example: did you know there is a realm full of elves out there? Supposedly they're really liberal and wild sex orgies are totally socially acceptable? I wanna go there!'

Of course, of all the things Loki could possibly tell him, that was what he remembered most vividly. Bruce barely refrained from face palming.

'You know, I could have been happy without that knowledge.' The scientist groaned.

'No, you couldn't. Think about all the possibilities!'

'Please, stop talking.'

To that Tony just laughed.

~

They were lounging in the workshop again. Stark was busy tinkering with one of his suit's gloves and educating Loki on various kinds of modern music. He was just about to introduce him to Queen and *Bohemian Rhapsody* when an alarm went off and seconds after Fury's voice filled the room.

'We have a situation in the port.'

Tony glanced at the god.

'What situation?' He asked the Director.

'A fucking giant whale is floating over the bay.'

'A what?'

'Did I stutter Stark? Move your ass down here ASAP!' The inventor could almost hear a vein on Fury's forehead go *pop*.

'Geez grumpy.'

'It's fucking destroying private property! If I won't see your tin, shiny ass here in five minutes I'm sending the bill to Stark Industries!' Fury growled. It definitely wasn't his best day.

'Pepper would chew you over.' Tony quipped.

Before Fury could respond, probably with some death threats, Steve's voice interjected.

'We're on our way.'

'You better be.' The Director barked out and the line went dead.

Tony got up and hurried to his assembling platform. He stood still as the Mark XLII enveloped him. While he waited for the HUD to light up, he wished briefly that Loki could see his awesome newest creation.

'Don't wait for me honey; I might be late for dinner.'

Before the god could respond Stark fired the repulsors and he was off.

~

'So is that a Chitauri scout whale?' Tony asked over the comm.

'According to Coulson it looks different and it's a little smaller than the Chitauri one.' Cap answered swiftly.

'That son of a bitch is working in the field again? I thought he was on Bahamas or something.'

'Tahiti and not any more Stark.' A familiar voice sounded in his helmet's speakers.

'How was the sand?'

'Hot and everywhere. Are we done here, because you have a giant fish to defeat.'

'Oh! I see it. It doesn't really look like a fish to me.' Iron man made a large arch around the thing and let Jarvis perform a scan. 'More like... uh I've got nothing, let's go with fish... How far away are you?'

The comm cracked and Steve's voice responded.

'ETA: 2 minutes.'

'So um, what's the plan? We're supposed to kill it or what?' Tony asked while making a third round around the whale. For now Jarvis' scans didn't detect anything worth mentioning, except that it was definitely extraterrestrial. Neat.

'Let's just concentrate on minimalizing casualties and property damage. Take it further from shore.' Cap's voice rang through his earpiece.

Suddenly Jarvis chimed in.

*'Sir, there is a private call from the Tower.'*

'What? Who?'

*'Mister Laufeyson, sir.'*

The hero stopped mid-air and hovered in place for a second, briefly distracted by the weirdness of this situation.

'Loki? Patch him through.' The line connected and Loki's image popped on his HUD.

'Stark?'

'Miss me already? I wasn't even gone for an hour.' He smiled at the scowl the Trickster sent him. With a corner of his eye Tony noticed that the creature stopped chewing on the nearest boat and now floated lazily just above the water surface. Small cracks of electricity sparked around its fins. 'You need something? I'm a little busy at the moment.' Just as he said that Thor whooshed past him aiming Mjölnir at the space fish/slug/thing.

'Shit!' Tony swore startled. He then followed the god at a little lower speed.

'Describe the creature to me Stark.'

'What do you wanna know? It's ugly as fuck, it looks like a fish... sorta, I'm still debating that and oh, it can fucking *fly*!' He sent a missile at the alien's hind fin (seriously what was that thing?!) at the same time as Thor's lightning connected with its front. The creature wailed almost like a whale and started to turn in Iron man's direction.

'By the Norns, be more specific!' Loki sighed exasperated.

'Oh sorry, I forgot you were still there. It's mostly blue, but the... the fins, let's go with fins, are yellowish-red. It's about 180 feet long and sometimes discharges electricity around itself. Oh look, it also has horns, but I think yours were bigger.'

Loki just huffed not deeming it worthy of any comment.

*'Sir, Captain Rogers demands an update.'*

'What, he's blind too? Connect the quinjet and Thor, but exclude Coulson. I don't want him to hear Loki.'

S.H.I.E.L.D. might know about the Thunderer's come back, but they don't have to know about his brother's just yet. It was kind of hard to hide the fact that Bifrost was opened on Manhattan that night, but they came to an agreement that it was better to leave Loki out of the story. Tony was sure it was Fury's secret Christmas wish to perform a vivisection on the Trickster just for shits and giggles.

The billionaire had to do a swift barrel to dodge a pressurized stream of liquid suddenly gushing out of the creature's mouth.

'Whoa! What the hell!' He plummeted down almost to the water's level and shot a repulsor blast at the alien's belly. He didn't do any significant damage. Thor was keeping it busy with his lightning, but it didn't seem to help either.

'Listen carefully,' Loki's voice streamed through the comm and Tony heard a gasp probably from Steve and a loud 'Brother!' from Thor. 'The creature is called a sulphur slug and it normally inhabits Svartalfheim's Great Sulphur Ocean. I do not know how it came to be on Midgard, but it cannot roam near any large body of water.'

'A mighty opponent from the Dark World!' Thor bellowed somewhere above.

'Um, why?' Stark asked with alarm, observing as the alien slug spat a yellowish stream of liquid at the Thunder God again.

'Because it will want to breed and you will not be able to defeat a whole swarm.' Loki answered, his voice grim.

The inventor avoided a few big globs of fluid that started raining down from the creature's earlier attack.

'Oh great, little alien babies.' From behind him the quinjet's engines roared with power and the ship let out a series of small, but deadly missiles. Sadly they only managed to enrage the slug more. It wailed in a higher pitch, almost damaging Tony's eardrums and spat a series of projectiles at them. Tony shot some with his repulsor blasts and avoided the others, but before he could react and fly away, a second volley was shot at them and one connected with his right glove. Instantly it started to smoke.

'Shit, shit, shit! It spat on me!' Tony cursed waving his arm frantically. It was now wholly engulfed by sickly-yellow fumes.

'Where?' Loki demanded to know. The hero wasn't sure, but he thought he heard a hint of panic in the god's voice.

'In the glove!' He was starting to feel the heat emanating from the plating and an alert flashed in the corner of his eye. Steve meanwhile flew away, some of the quinjet's outer shell damaged just like Tony's armor.

'Get rid of it Stark! Now! It's highly acidic and it will devour your arm along with the glove!' There was definitely nervousness in Loki's voice now.

'Oh fuck, oh fuck! Jarvis disconnect the right glove!' Tony shouted, panic twisting his gut. The heat was almost unbearable now. He could feel his under-suit's fabric melt over his skin. He was so goddamn screwed.

*'Disconnection in three seconds...'*

Without thinking Tony dove straight down into the ocean. The glove sizzled on contact with water and fell away, leaving his hand unprotected. He felt the uncomfortable sting as salty water reached his blistered skin, but the damage wasn't fatal; thank gods, or one to be more specific.

'Fuck! That was goddamn close!' The inventor panted as he emerged from within the ocean, just in time to witness Thor's cape burning to shreds from one of the alien's attacks.

'Loki how in the hell are we supposed to kill this thing?' Tony watched with concern as Thor almost got hit in the face with another attack. The slug was now furious and was spitting acid everywhere around. And once it connected with water it evaporated leaving behind a toxic yellowish cloud.

At this rate they will poison the ocean and air at the port, Tony thought.

'I do not know.' Loki's voice sounded grim over the comm.

'What do you mean, you don't know?! It's one of your fucking godly monsters! You have to know!' Stark shouted while speeding away awkwardly with only one glove to stabilize his flight when an acidic rain started pouring at the spot he just hovered at a second before.

Cap was circling around them with the quinjet, sending volley after volley of missiles, but they seemed to only tickle the slug.

'I do not know!' Loki shouted back. With the corner of his eye Tony noticed the god started to pace nervously in front of the sofa, but he quickly had to turn his gaze back to the battlefield when another attack almost connected with his chest. Even a drop on the arc reactor and he was no more.

'I only read about them in passing when I was but a child. I never imagined I would ever encounter one!' The Trickster started cursing in a language Tony didn't recognize and didn't particularly care about at the moment. More and more toxic steam floated just above the waves. They were wasting time they didn't have! They had to do something, anything!

'What about their hearts brother? Aren't they similar to a dragon's fire stone?' Thor asked over the comm. He was breathing heavily. The HUD, prompted by the inventor's silent command, zoomed in on the god. He was sporting several burn marks and his armor was in really bad condition. He summoned his own rain to wash away the creature's deadly poison.

'Oh! Yes! Yes, of course! Stark you have to fly underneath it and locate a faintly glowing point somewhere in the middle of its belly. It may be hard to spot, but it should emanate a lot of heat. You have to destroy it, yet it will not be easy. The underbelly is most likely protected by a thick layer of skin.'

'Roger that!' He flew closer looking for the glow, at the same time avoiding acid leaking from the slug's maw. It took him a few tense seconds, but finally Jarvis located a significant increase in heat at a spot right between its front fins.

'Okay guys, I have it. Let's do this!'

'Tony, wait!' It was Bruce.

'We don't have time to wait; we have to kill it now!'

'I agree, but not here. It will sink into the ocean and annihilate all life within a few miles radius. Not to mention that an accompanying tsunami wave would wash away the port. We need to guide it onto some beach away from the city and only then shot it down.' The doctor explained patiently. And it made sense. Now they just had to execute it.

'Jarvis find me a spot.'

*'Calculating...'*

'I notified Coulson. He and Fury agree that it's the only option.' Steve's voice was full of determination. They wasted a lot of time already.

Finally Jarvis projected a map with a marked location and they started a tedious task of luring the creature there.

~

After almost two hours of back and forth with the slug they finally managed to move it away from the city. By that time they were all physically and emotionally exhausted, but there was one last



task left before they could go home.

'Okay guys, we have only one chance to do it right. I can shot it with my unibeam, but after that I'm going to be useless. Thor, buddy you will have to catch me, there will be no juice left in the reactor to power the armor. That leaves Steve and Bruce in the quinjet as a decoy, any questions?'

They were over the sand pit at Sandy Hook. It was slowly getting dark and thanks to Thor, grey clouds veiled the setting sun. Tony's right hand was killing him, all he wanted right now was a hot bath and maybe a massage from Loki... wait, where did that came from? He had to be really tired if his mind conjured such fantasies. Oh, but the mental image... No! Now was not the time for that. They had a job to do.

'Ready?'

'Aye friends, let us begin!' Thor boomed with excitement, but it was evident his injuries were staring to take their toll.

'Let's do it.' Stark could hear the quinjet's engines power up again as Steve started to maneuver the plane towards the alien's front.

'Be careful.' Tony whispered. Loki fell silent some time ago.

He flew down, positioned himself at an angle and away to avoid getting hit by one of those giant fins.

'Iron man in position.' He reported. 'Launching unibeam in 10... 5... 3... 2... 1!'

A burst of white-blue light shot straight from his chest and hit the bull's eye. It was followed by a deafening wail from the monster and as it shuddered violently a gush of black ichor burst from the wound.

While freefalling Tony noticed the electromagnetic current the creature was creating brightened with a loud crack and as the heavy body succumbed to gravity the magnetic field surrounding it disappeared entirely. Then Thor caught him and he was carried away to the quinjet. The inventor was ready to collapse on the spot.

'Good work guys. Fury says the debriefing can wait until tomorrow!' Steve shouted from the pilot's seat.

'Cap, even if he wanted to do it in my bedroom I wouldn't fuck care.' Stark panted heavily. 'I just want to sleep, like for a week. Let's just go home.'

~

Loki was waiting for them in the common room. He paced around the furniture like a caged animal. When he heard them enter, the god jumped to Tony so quickly and without hesitation, the inventor though he teleported.

'Show me your hand.' He commanded with his princely voice.

'Um, it's not so bad, Bruce treated it. Thor is worse, you should check him first.'

The younger god just waved a hand dismissively.

'He had worse; it's you humans that are so delicate. Come, sit.'

Loki took his other hand and guided him to the sofa. The rest of the Avengers observed this scene in various stages of disbelief. Not minding them in the slightest the god gently took Stark's injured hand and removed the gauze. His pleasantly cool fingers traced the burns and blisters, but the pain wasn't as intense as Tony anticipated. Overall it was quite a nice feeling. Loki's faint magic felt good on his skin and he noticed the wound started to heal almost instantly.

'You don't have to heal it all the way you know, just enough to make the pain less of a bitch.' Stark peered at the God of Mischief and then at his friends. Cap was frowning again, so was Bruce, but Tony assumed it was for an entirely different reason. He probably wanted to steal Loki and study his healing magic. Thor's reaction fluctuated from wary, to confused, to happy and then made a full circle.

Meanwhile Loki shook his head.

'No, it would leave scars and there is a possibility of your fingers not bending properly. I shall finish.'

'You will wear yourself down again,' Tony whispered. The immortal's lips formed a thin, displeased line, but he was too stubborn to admit to any sort of discomfort.

'It is of no consequence, and besides healing arts use more of the patient's strength than that of a healer.'

Thor grunted somewhere behind, but Tony was focused on the god in front of him. He had to admit he was concerned, still remembering Loki's weakened state after their first experiment. Yet he didn't want to argue in front of the others.

Finally the Trickster let his hands drop with a small sigh and leaned heavily on the cushions.

'Come brother; let me see to your wounds now. I assume the Captain and the Doctor are unharmed?'

'Nay Loki, there is no need.' Thor boomed and stepped closer. A heavy hand landed on the black-haired god's shoulder.

'I am glad you found a friend in Tony Stark!' The Thunderer beamed at Tony. 'I know he is not the easiest person to be around, but you seem to get along well.'

'Gee thanks big guy.' Stark grimaced.

'If there is nothing else for me to attend to, I shall retire to my rooms then.' Loki sighed, standing up. A cold wave, which Tony was used to by now, enveloped them as the god maneuvered around furniture and towards the exit.

'I thought you couldn't do magic.' Steve finally found his voice. He stood between the Trickster and the elevator, his back rigid with tension.

'It appears,' Loki drawled tiredly, 'even the All-Father is unable to predict every situation I may find myself in. His sigils can be worked around to a small degree.'

'So what else can you do? Blow stuff up?'

'Nothing Captain,' the god growled, hands curling into fists. 'Even that small display of goodwill left me drained. If it so displeases you, I shall refrain from helping in the future. It would be to my benefit.'

'Let it go Steve, he didn't do anything wrong.' Tony tried to save the situation. He put a calming hand on the small of Loki's back (and it was kind of alarming that the god didn't even react to that, he had to be really tired) and lightly pushed him forward and around the star-spangled blockade.

But Steve didn't want to back away.

'He can use magic Tony. He lied to us.'

'Yes, maybe, but he also saved our asses today and fucking healed my hand, something he didn't need to do!' This time it was Tony's turn to get mad. Cap glared at him, but said nothing more and just moved out of their way. As the elevator's doors closed the god leaned heavily on Tony.

'Come on Bambi, I think we both need some rest now.' The inventor sighed tiredly. And when the doors opened on their floor he was glad to finally be home.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 6

The elevator chimed as the doors opened soundlessly and Tony sluggishly stepped out onto his workshop's floor. After almost four hours of shareholders meeting his brain was full of wool. What he needed right now was a stimulating new project to occupy his mind with.

He entered the authorization code and went through the whole fingerprint and cornea scanning process automatically, so used to it by now to not even register it happening. Finally there was a quiet sound and the doors opened, admitting him into his sanctuary and Jarvis' perfect British voice greeted him with a usual: *'Welcome home sir.'*

Tony was just about to answer with something witty, but as he opened his lips to inhale, almost arctic air invaded his windpipe and lungs, effectively choking him. The inventor coughed, and as his eyes watered from the sudden assault, he staggered back anticipating an attack. When nothing happened and the first shock subsided he managed to rasp out.

'What the hell Jarvis? Are you planning to turn me into Cap 2.0? What's with the sudden ice age?'

The engineer, unaccustomed to such low temperatures, instantly started shivering, and his breath came out in form of a small white cloud. He rubbed his hands to bring some heat back.

*'I'm sorry sir; the heating unit has been unresponsive for the last hour.'* The AI sounded apologetic.

'Why?!'

'That would be my doing.' Another voice joined in and Tony's tired brown eyes landed on his residing God of Lies.

'What did you do?'

Stark massaged his temples. There was a massive headache brewing, he could feel it. He was tired and just wanted to sit down at a workbench and immerse himself into some fun project. But noooo... he now had to crawl in some small spaces to find and fix what the God of Mischief broke.

'I am not certain... It was an experiment. I wanted to ascertain if I could access my inherited powers without triggering those loathsome sigils. I did not notice, at first, that the temperature drop was this severe. The cold does not bother me as much as it does you. It was Jarvis' words that brought me back from my musings. Only then I comprehended what had transpired.'

Loki slowly gestured towards the sofa he usually occupied when in the workshop. Its black leather cracked in several places and frost crept from the center, painting the material with beautiful white patterns.

The god stood beside it like a puppy that shredded his owner's new furniture... well he wasn't far off. Tony just sighed.

'But why the heating isn't working?'

*'The sensors aren't responding sir. You would have to check if they are functioning and restart the program manually.'* Jarvis supplied.

'Just what I needed right now.' Stark grumbled loosening his tie. He needed to change into something warmer if he wanted to have all his limbs intact after this. Did he even own any sweaters? He would have to check.

Tony spotted a blanket Pepper left there ages ago, shook it out, so it would unfold, cascading to the floor. It was pale blue, with some complicated swirls around the edges.

Without thinking, the inventor wrapped it around the god cozily and rubbed at his forearms to bring out some warmth.

'You look good in blue.' He said offhandedly.

At those words however Loki recoiled as if slapped. His unseeing eyes widened in shock as his hands travelled to his face, searching for something not there. The blanket plummeted to the ground to pool around the Trickster's feet.

It took a moment for Tony to realize what he just said and how the god interpreted it, and an alarm flared in his mind.

He knew about Loki's heritage. Thor told them about it to explain some of the younger god's earlier actions. The billionaire, of course, never saw how Loki really looked like, but he recalled Thor saying that his brother loathed it with his whole being.

He remembered the Thunder God's description of Frost Giants... Big, brutish and blue skinned...

The engineer wanted to curse. He unwilling triggered one of Loki's fears and he didn't really know how to handle the fallout. He caught the god's hands in his own and pried them from his face. They were ice cold.

Stark sighed internally. Sometimes the simplest things managed to induce a negative reaction in the god.

'Hey, stop, stop. You're not blue. It's okay. You're uh... pale as a sheet, but not Jotun blue!'

'You!' Loki hissed, instantly going from panicked to enraged. 'You know? **How?** Did that blundering oaf told you? That his adopted sibling is a monster in disguise?' The god snarled and tried to free himself from the billionaire's grip. He was stronger now, but still not enough to fully succeed. Tony wouldn't have that. He was tired and cold, his head hurt as hell and he had a heating problem to solve. Loki's anger wasn't something he wanted to deal with right now.

'Stop!' He said firmly and the god faltered in his struggle. 'Thor told us what we needed to know. He never called you a monster or anything like that. He just said that you were of a different species and that Odin took you in after some war a long time ago.'

'He stole me away as he stole the Casket of Ancient Winters, to be used at his leisure when needed!' Loki growled and started struggling again. Tony, at the end of his patience, finally let him go. Suddenly being free, the Trickster stumbled back and landed on the frosted sofa, a sharp crack



of tearing leather following.

'I don't care if you are a Frost Giant, an Aesir or a goddamn human!' The inventor shouted. His head was killing him and he was freezing his balls off. Also his fingers started to go numb from the cold. What he needed was a cup of scalding hot coffee, not a shouting match with the God of Mischief.

'I don't care,' he repeated tiredly. 'It does not change a thing. Now, will you calm down and let me fix the fucking sensors before I turn into an icicle?'

Loki didn't say anything, he just sat there stunned. Tony bent down and picked up the discarded blanket and once again wrapped it around the god's shoulders.

'Did you succeed?' Stark asked softly, trying to ease the tension a little. The god blinked with confusion.

'What?'

'With your experiment. Did it work?'

'Not as I anticipated, no.' The immortal grimaced.

'What were you trying to do anyway? Summon another ice age? Because, you know, I like the climate we have now.' The god snorted and hugged the blanket closer to his chest.

'It was always the easiest for me to summon ice, now I finally know why, but it would not answer this time.' He fidgeted with a frying end of the blanket between his slim, cold fingers. 'It would not come to me, just pain and exhaustion as the All-Father intended.' He sighed dejected.

Tony patted him on the shoulder.

'You managed to freeze the room, that's something. But next time warn me, so I can dress better. I can't feel my fingers anymore.' The inventor smiled crookedly, a bit of humor back in his voice. Loki just inclined his head and a small smile bloomed on his lips.

~

It took him almost an hour to replace the unresponsive sensors and heat the workshop to a sensible temperature.

Finally warm and with mug filled to the brim with coffee Tony sat in front of his monitors, ready to work. He cracked his fingers, then neck and froze. He was just so goddamn tired and warm. His eyes were almost dropping and his mind still felt fuzzy. So he just sat there in his favorite chair, a Rubik's cube clicking softly between his fingers, as his thoughts wandered aimlessly.

Loki lay on the sofa, the blue blanket neatly folded under his head now that the room was warm again. He was humming to the tunes of *Mozart's Piano Concerto No. 10 in E-flat major* (as Jarvis supplied) and tapping his fingers on the dark leather. Tony observed the god's sprawled form with interest. After the whole drama earlier he seemed quite relaxed now, eyes closed and long fingers rhythmically moving to the music. To Tony's chagrin, from all the choices the inventor offered him, Loki liked classical music the best. So they had to come to a compromise: Jarvis would shuffle their favorite tracks randomly when the god was in the workshop, because while Loki couldn't stand the billionaire's choice of music, Tony was equally averse to the god's. It was about time to introduce him to some epic scores like *Braveheart* or *Lord of the Rings*.

The clicking of the cube intensified as the engineer's mind started to wake up from its haze. He was finally ready to start working in earnest. With a few twists he finished the puzzle and put it away. He then motioned for Jarvis to light up the rest of his displays.

'Why did you stop?' He heard the god's voice.

'Stop what? I'm just starting.'

'The sound, the clicking. It was soothing.' Loki sat up slowly. 'What was that?'

'Oh just a toy to exercise your brain.'

'How does it work?' The god asked, curiosity coloring his voice.

Tony once again picked up the cube and made his way to the sofa. He sat down next to the other and placed the toy in his lap. The Trickster carefully lifted it and with delicate fingers started turning the parts.

'Each wall is painted in a different color and consists of nine smaller cubes. When you twist it you mix the colors. The goal of this exercise is to sort them back, so each wall's color is restored, preferably with as little twists as possible.' The inventor explained.

Loki was slowly rotating the sections, this way and that. After a while he outstretched his hand and presented it to Tony.

'It is a pity then that I cannot complete the puzzle.'

'Yeah...' the genius weighed it in his palm, pondering how to make it accessible to the god.

'*If I may, sir.*' Jarvis chimed in. '*Maybe you could carve symbols onto the walls, so mister Laufeyson could feel instead of seeing them.*'

'That's actually a great idea J! Oh and I know what symbols those will be.' Tony almost cackled. He picked up the Rubik's cube and went to search for his laser carver.

'What are you planning?' The god asked.

He knew that Stark wanted to play a trick on him. He once again cursed Odin for this whole situation. He could have designed any kind of punishment and he chose the one that made Loki the most vulnerable. The god sighed. He was not sure if there existed a way for him to regain his sight. He wasn't that worried about the sigils the All-Father placed upon him. They could be fooled and with some experiments, and a little practice, Loki was confident he could successfully work around them. But the damage done to his face was trickier. The serpent was no normal animal. It was a magical construct devised especially for this task by Skaði and Odin himself. Loki reluctantly had to admit it was a splendid manifestation of *Seiðr* craft. The venom was torturous in itself, but additionally it was also imbued with a curse to prevent the flesh from healing properly, yet not damaging it enough to kill the prisoner.

Loki was abruptly brought back from his grim thoughts by Stark's loud voice.

'Jarvis, I want this side red, my kind of red and this one green, Hawkeye can have pink, it suits him. The rest you know. Yes! Now for the symbols... '

He spent a few hours finishing his personalized Avengers' cube, as he liked to call it. The paint job looked great and the pictograms even better. He also installed a small speaker that went: *Taadaa!* or *Good job Snowflake!* or other stupid exclamation like that in Tony's voice, once the puzzle was successfully completed. He was sure Loki would try to kill him for that, but it was going to be worth it, to see the Trickster's face first time he completes it.

Tony gave his new creation one last look and, after not detecting any flaws (there obviously couldn't be any, Jarvis supervised the whole process after all), he handed it to the god. Loki tentatively traced every pattern with utmost concentration, memorizing each one of them. His brow creased in confusion, then rose as he recognized the symbols carved onto the cube. Tony could see the exact moment he realized what they meant.

'Avengers' crests?' He asked, lips upturned in a smile.

'Yup! You recognize them? Are they easy to discern?' Tony asked, instantly mesmerized by Loki's smooth hands going over the sharp edges familiarizing himself with the puzzle. The god hummed appreciatively and started twisting the sections to mix them up.

'Yes, I do recognize most of them. For instance Mjöltnir and the Widow's mark. I assume the star belongs to the good Captain and the bow and arrow to Barton. I am not familiar however with the three triangles and a circle in the middle of them, and I don't know what the device depicted here representing you is called.'

'The small circle of light in my chest? It's called the arc reactor. And the other one is a warning sign against radioactivity. I don't know if you have something like that in Asgard, but here on Earth there are substances that are highly dangerous for humans to even be around them. Exposure may even lead to death, depending on the quantity of the radiation human's body absorbs over time.'

'Is this what happened to the doctor? He got... exposed?' The Trickster asked curiously, still twisting and turning the cube.

Tony rubbed his chin. It wasn't his story to tell, but this info wasn't really harmful.

'Yeah, something like that.' He admitted reluctantly. 'If you want the full story though, you should ask Bruce yourself, but let me warn you, it's not something he discusses lightly, so there is a big possibility that he will refuse you. So if I were you, I'd rather avoid making him angry. You should know, you have experience in that matter.' The inventor smirked, remembering the *Loki crater* in his apartment from two years ago. It still amazed him that Loki was able to crawl out of it on his own after all the beating he got from Hulk. A normal human would only be a bloody stain on the marble floor.

'Not only he carries a monster within himself Tony Stark,' the god whispered so quietly Tony almost missed it. Still, he knew exactly what the god meant. His heritage haunted him and it was impossible to get rid of even if he tried really hard. Yet Tony carried a monster of his own, or rather a vivid memory of one, called the Merchant of Death. It would seem they all had their monsters. The question was what they could do to stop them from causing harm. Tony was on his way to bury his in work, promoting clean energy and technological advancement, not only in day to day devices, but also medical equipment. Bruce was focused on helping people more face to face with his medical skills, but what could Loki do to defeat his monster? And what could Tony do to help him with that?

For now it remained an unknown factor in his equation, but he was very determined to solve it.

## Chapter 7

It was a chilly Monday morning. The snow wasn't falling yet, but it probably would soon, if the weather forecast turned out to be true.

Steve was just preparing breakfast for Thor, Bruce and himself, when he heard an unexpected sound. At first he thought that perhaps Natasha came back from her mission earlier than they anticipated, because the footsteps that came from the hallway sounded a lot like hers - light and careful, almost inaudible.

After a while of living with the team Steve learned to distinguish every member's unique way of walking. Thor's footsteps were the easiest to discern. The god always stomped loudly and with great confidence. The heavy work boots, that he favored while on Earth, didn't exactly help to muffle the sound either. Bruce was quieter and he often dragged his feet when relaxed. Tony, on the other hand always seemed to be in a hurry to do something, start a new project, or conduct an experiment, and just like Thor, his footsteps were full of confidence and sureness. Clint... well Clint was a little different. He took it upon himself to scare the living soul out of Tony every time he could, while approaching stealthy. He sometimes tried that with Steve too, but after one time of being thrown violently to the floor, thanks to the soldier's super reflexes, he stopped. Stark was a funnier target, especially after he started devising some traps for the archer to overcome, as a form of punishment. Sometimes they even chased each other around the tower, throwing weird stuff at one another, like old, smelly socks, or spoiled food, one of Stark's robots trailing behind, cleaning after them.

So it came as a surprise when the person emerging from the hallway turned out to be Loki. Steve stood completely still and observed, as the god wandered slowly along one wall, casually touching furniture here and there. He almost jumped out of his skin, so concentrated on the Trickster's movements, when Loki suddenly spoke.

'Please do not forget to breathe Captain. I am certain, even your enhanced body can sustain itself only for so long without air.'

'What are you doing here? I thought you refused to leave your suite.' Steve exhaled audibly. The bacon he was frying almost burned to a crisp, so he hastily took it off the stove.

'I am exploring. I have been informed that the common floor is not forbidden area for my person. Have I been misinformed? Am I not welcome here?' The god asked as his brow rose in confusion. His face displayed openness and sincerity, but Steve had a distinctive feeling that he was being mocked. He took a better look at the immortal. He hasn't seen him since the alien slug incident. Loki seemed different. Steve could almost say that he looked healthy, except of course the permanent damage done to his face, but even that wasn't as prominent as before. He finally got rid of his awful Asgardian tunic in favor of a dark wool sweater and black, almost skin tight jeans. He

still wore no shoes and his feet were bare.

'No, of course not. You can be here if you want. I was just surprised to see you are all.'

Steve observed as the god carefully came closer and sat at the kitchen bar. Not thinking twice the Captain took a few apples from a nearby bowl and started to peel them swiftly. He then cut each into small pieces and put the plate in front of Loki.

'Here,' he said, 'apples.'

The God of Mischief appeared conflicted for a moment, then suddenly Steve felt a strange sensation on his skin, as if the air around them got electrified. At first he thought that Thor came in, but then realized it was Loki's magic filling the air around them with static electricity.

'You are doing it again,' he eyed the god, 'magic.'

'This is my nature, dear Captain, tricks and deceptions,' the immortal snorted. 'Do not be alarmed, it is harmless, mostly for my peace of mind.'

'What are you doing exactly? It feels different than the last time.'

'Oh?' The god took an apple piece and started to nibble on it. 'Is it so unheard of that various spells can feel or look different from one another?' He then asked.

Steve couldn't stop to notice that the god was a lot calmer now, totally unlike before his punishment, when he would snarl at Thor or anyone else for the matter.

'I don't know. Maybe I'm not from this era, but I'm pretty sure there aren't that many people here, on Earth, that knows magic well. I'm just curious, that's all.' The Captain shrugged.

'Of course. Let me then put it that way. When you are, for example, painting, do you only use one brush, or a whole array of tools?'

To Steve that made more sense. Surely one could use only a single tool to draw or paint, but that had its limitations. An artist could limit himself in that way to challenge his talent and try to make the best of it, if he chose to. But to truly understand art one ought to dabble in everything, even just a little, to then choose what tools one feels most comfortable with. And Loki had a long time to master his arts.

He was just about to say that when Thor entered the kitchen. The older god's face instantly lit in a bright smile upon seeing his sibling.

'Brother! I did not expect to see you here!' He shouted enthusiastically.

Loki grimaced from the sheer volume of the Thunderer's voice.

'Yes, good morrow brother, please desist being so obnoxiously loud so early in the morning.'

Thor laughed to that, but his next words were quieter.

'What brings you here? Are you hungry? Has Tony Stark been neglecting you, in favor of his work?' The last part he almost growled, his brow forming an angry line.

'No, he has been a gracious host to me. I am merely bored, and he probably slumbers still, so I decided to venture here instead.' The Trickster swept his hand in a wide gesture encompassing the spacious kitchen.



Steve decided it was time for him to step in before the food he made went cold.

'Thor you want breakfast?' At the god's nod he busied himself with preparing a plate for him. Thor meanwhile sat next to Loki and eyed him critically.

'You look thin brother, are you eating well?' The displeasure in his voice was palpable. The Captain was certain, he still felt a little sour over the fact that Loki would rely more on Tony than him. Steve wanted to sigh; the dynamics between those two were so complicated.

He placed a full plate in front of the Thunderer and a second for Loki, but the younger god just picked up another piece of an apple and shook his head.

'Thank you Captain, but I am not hungry.'

'Brother, do not say that! You look malnourished. You should eat more meat and not those flimsy fruits.' Thor moved the plate closer to the mage.

Loki's jaw tensed as if he was restraining himself from shouting at his brother. Thor though appeared oblivious to the shift in tension and even patted Loki on the shoulder encouragingly.

'You should build more muscle,' he laughed heartily then and dug into his own serving.

Wanting to salvage the situation Cap hastily made some tea and set it before the black-haired god.

'Tea? Sugar? Milk?'

'Sugar please,' the Trickster exhaled tiredly.

'So earlier you were talking about art. Do you perhaps practice?' Just after he asked Steve reflected that it was probably an inappropriate question considering the circumstances, but it was too late now to take it back.

'I may have dabbled a little in the past,' Loki drawled. He was worrying on a piece of fruit.

'He's too modest. Let me tell you Captain, he once painted a canvas so exquisite that our greatest artists were all in awe! It still hangs in our mother's chambers.' Thor said with his mouth full of bacon. He always devoured his food in record time. The soldier was astonished how much the god could eat in one go. And he drank copious amounts of coffee, almost as much as Tony.

'Yes, and then accused me of stealing it from someone else, if you have forgotten.' Loki hissed and stood up, ready to leave.

'Oh, I would have loved to see it.' The Captain said, adding more bacon on Thor's plate.

'I could show...' Loki hesitated for a fraction of a second. 'If you could provide a freshly painted canvas, it is possible for me to show you roughly how it is done.'

'Truly?'

'I suppose.' The god looked distant.

'Do you have something to do now?' Steve asked excited. It wasn't everyday one could witness something like that. He wasn't entirely sure what to expect, but he was certain it would be a show to remember. 'I have some unused canvases in my study. It wouldn't take long to paint one.'

'There is nothing better for you to do brother, let us see your gifts at work.'

The Thunderer stood up and went to the sink to deposit his empty plate there. 'Although how is it possible for you to use your tricks again? I thought father had bound your magic.' Thor knit his brow in confusion. 'Did you manage to break the sigils?'

'No Thor,' Loki sighed. 'There are ways to bypass the markings. Non harmful spells are one of them. I can use small amounts of *Seiðr* to aid myself in trifle matters, yet I am unable to cast complex, multi-layered spells. Those vile stigmas prevent my body from accumulating *Seiðr* as it should. Instead flowing fluidly through my veins alongside blood, it clots and fights me at every step. And if you paid any attention to our tutors, you would know that attempting to spell cast without a tight reign over your *Seiðr* is highly dangerous and plainly foolish. I do not wish to suffer through pain just for a few seconds of revenge, as sweet as it sometimes appears to be.'

'It is good to hear you do not seek vengeance upon our mortal friends Loki.' The younger god just shook his head exasperated and addressed the soldier instead.

'Shall we Captain?'

~

It took Steve about half an hour to assemble all his tools and prepare the canvas. By the time he finished, the gods were bickering and reminiscing about old times (Thor) and cursing their friends stupid antics (Loki). It was actually pleasant to listen to Thor's boisterous voice when he retold some glorious battle they fought in when they were younger. Loki sometimes added a commentary of his own, mostly on how his brother and the Warriors Three never could stick to the plan and ultimately would ruin the Trickster's carefully crafted schemes. Steve couldn't help but notice that the God of Mischief was a really good strategist and highly intelligent fellow. It was a bit of surprise, considering the attack on Manhattan being so disorganized and chaotic. The soldier recalled that Thor always prized Loki for his immense intelligence, yet the whole invasion seemed so improvised. He would have to talk to Tony about this; he hung with the God of Lies more often and maybe could shed some light on the matter.

'Is it done?' Loki suddenly asked.

Steve took one last appraising look at the canvas and stepped away from the easel.

'Yeah, do your thing.'

The god then stood up and outstretched his hand towards the painted surface. His fingers hovered mere millimeters above the canvas, but didn't even graze the still drying paint. At first nothing was happening and after a few moments of silence Steve glanced at Thor uncertainty. The Thunderer just shrugged and kept staring at his brother's back.

Loki's brow furrowed and he muttered something under his breath, then grit his teeth as his fingers spasmed over the painting. Slowly thin lines started to spread from under his palm, like vines, towards the edges. Some were thicker and deeper than the others. It looked as if someone grabbed a needle and started tracing its tip in the wet paint. Steve watched mesmerized as the picture, Loki was creating, slowly took form. It reminded him a little of frost painting its intricate and delicate patterns on windows during cold, winter nights. The Captain looked on as some lines swirled and looped, some crossing, others only grazing one another and never truly meeting. Before he noticed, the painting was done, and the Trickster's hand dropped to his side. Loki took a step back, and if not for Thor's reflex, he would have fallen to the floor.

'Brother!'

'It is nothing,' the younger god sighed while attempting to stand up without help. Thor would have none of that. He looped his big arm around the other's god waist and steadied him against his own chest.

'You overexerted yourself.' The disapproval in his voice this time was laced with concern and before the younger could protest, he continued. 'I shall take you back to your chambers so you can rest.' He then proceeded to almost carry him out of the room.

'Wait!' The Trickster struggled in his arms. 'Did it work?'

The Thunderer took one look at the painting and smiled sadly.

'Yes brother. As always, you managed to capture hers beauty as no one else ever could.' There were emotions in Thor's voice Steve couldn't quite discern.

'Good,' Loki whispered and let himself be escorted out.

When they left Steve finally took a better look at the painting. It was truly exquisite. Loki asked for the canvas to be painted in midnight blue and now it became obvious why. It portrayed a great garden, beautifully arranged. A pond took the center stage, framed by old and gracefully bent willows. A lone, grand ash tree stood in the background, almost entirely obscured by the lush greenery closer to the water. There were flowers that, with a bit of will, resembled water lilies, floating on the surface. They seemed to be glowing in the faint light of the vanning moon and myriads of stars.

Near one of the trees, just next to the bank sat a woman. Her skirts lay splayed out on the ground like petals from the lilies she was gathering. Steve couldn't estimate her age, but he had a distinctive feeling it was the gods mother - Queen Frigga, if he recalled correctly. Just behind her, under the canopy, rested a huge stallion. It was hard to notice in the deep midnight shadows, but Cap could swear it had to many legs bend under its huge form. A few flower buds were intertwined in its black mane, probably by the Queen's hand itself. The soldier could almost hear her hum a soft tune to the great creature.

A dim ache bloomed in Steve's chest. It was possible that Loki would never see them again, his mother and the stallion. He was still a fugitive in Asgard and on Earth. Thor explained that they weren't hunted probably because Asgard's all-seeing gatekeeper - Heimdall could watch Loki's every step, now that the god was without his magic, and couldn't shield himself from his gaze. The All-Father would be notified if he'd step out of line and Loki knew it. Going back to Asgard would result in instant imprisonment and maybe torture again. It was in the god's best interest to not provoke Odin to send his guards for him. And that made Loki an exile. Thor could probably go back without bigger repercussions from his father, but he wouldn't leave his brother behind, of that Steve was certain. Besides, he started to like the God of Mischief just a little. It would be a shame to let him rot in a dungeon somewhere, forgotten and alone. And there was the issue of the invasion. A seed of doubt was planted in the soldier's heart, and he was determined to solve it. Even if it meant protecting Loki from Odin's rage. He was sure he wasn't alone in his sentiment.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 8

The elevator doors opened soundlessly admitting Pepper in. Her high stilettos clicked rhythmically as she approached the reinforced glass wall separating hallway from the actual workspace. The CEO of Stark Industries noticed her once-boss gesticulating wildly at the far end of the room. He appeared to be explaining something to a figure laying on the sofa. *Odd*, Pepper thought, except Rhodey, her and maybe sometimes Bruce, Tony rarely allowed someone access to his sanctuary, let alone stay for a prolonged period of time to be laying comfortably on a sofa. She curiously stretched her neck to look closer and finally recognized the other person. Loki - the Norse God of Mischief and Lies was explaining something in return to the inventor. His hands moved more fluidly and gracefully than Tony's, but he seemed no less absorbed in the topic they were discussing. It was... strange and maybe a little endearing to watch Tony so engrossed in a conversation with someone. Normally people tended to not understand half the things he was saying, but Loki appeared adept enough. He even argued back, but through the thick glass Pepper couldn't hear what they were saying.

Admittedly she was a little surprised to see the god here and so at ease. Tony told her, of course, about the circumstances of the gods arrival, but he also mentioned that the Trickster was avoiding the other residents as much as possible. Yet even from a distance Pepper could tell he enjoyed Tony's company, and it would seem the feeling was mutual. The woman shook her head with resignation. Only Tony Stark was capable of befriending a deranged deity, hell-bent on subjugating humanity.

Pepper looked at her watch and grimaced. As interesting as it was to study the couple, she had an important meeting in fifteen minutes. Without further delays she stepped closer to the glass door, entered the authorization code and let her cornea be scanned. The touch-screen briefly flashed green and the doors slid open. They didn't even notice her entrance, still engrossed in their discussion, until Jarvis announced her presence. Tony swung around on his chair and smiled at her. 'Pepper!' he exclaimed and stood up to greet her. 'Let me introduce you! This is Loki Laufeyson. The residing God of Mischief.' The redhead noticed that Loki sat stiffly at the edge of the sofa, his face devoid of any emotions, so different from just a few moments ago when he was genuinely smiling at Tony. She filed this curiosity for later to study.

'And this is my Pepper. Without her I would probably be lost somewhere under a mountain of paperwork and lawsuits.'

The god stood up and reached out a hand towards her. She shook it firmly as she studied his scarred face. It looked even more horrible than what she gathered from Tony's explanation.

'Hi.' She smiled. 'It's nice to finally meet you.'

'Likewise. Stark talks a lot about you.' Loki inclined his head.

'Does he now?' She eyed the inventor critically. Tony beamed at her, clearly in a good mood. Pepper had a feeling it would leave him soon.

'I hope you remember, you have a gala to attend tonight?' She addressed the engineer. The frown on his face told her that he in fact did forget about the party. The redhead sighed.

'Tony we discussed it. It is a very important charity event, I've been preparing for months now. Your attendance is mandatory. I let you off the hook the last time, remember? And you promised me, you would come to this one.'

'I said I would come to the Christmas party,' he muttered displeased. 'It's not even December yet Pep.'

*'The date today is December the 6th, sir.'* Jarvis supplied smoothly. Pepper was too used to this to even get angry. Tony just frowned.

'Really? It was September just a moment ago. How the time flies!'

'Please, just be ready at seven. I will send Happy for you. And no 'buts', you will attend, even if I'll have to drag your lifeless body there myself.' Pepper didn't have time to argue. A meeting with an important investor was starting in ten minutes and she couldn't afford to be late. It was time to go.

'But Pep!' The billionaire whined.

'No Tony! You promised.' She shouted over her shoulder walking towards the exit. 'It was nice meeting you mister Laufeyson.' The redhead added before the door clicked shut behind her.

~

It was boring, boring, boring! And did he mentioned **boring**?

Tony sat at the bar, lazily watching all those important people he didn't give a fuck about dancing and laughing all around him. He sipped his whisky slowly. Pepper was adamant he remained sober, and she was pissed enough at him for Tony to behave. At least for now. He scanned the crowd again in search of some kind of entertainment, but no one drew his attention. The billionaire sighed over his glass. He could have been in his workshop right now, discussing science with Loki, or doing experiments, but instead he got stuck here, surrounded by all those boring rich people. The only good thing that came out of this party was the money donated to Maria Stark Foundation. They intended to set up scholarships for young, promising inventors and help them achieve something in life. Maybe the next generation would be more interesting than the one he was supposed to entertain now.

Tony was just contemplating ordering a second glass when a gorgeous blonde sat right next to him. The engineer took an appraising look at her: body of a model, but not the skinny type, more like Victoria's Secret kind of girl. The blue dress she wore hugged her curves in a delicious way. Not even one lock of hair stood out of place on her complicated hairstyle. She smiled at him seductively as she signaled the bartender. The inventor smiled back automatically one of his press smiles. It was weird, the woman was stunning and totally into him (or his money, how naive), but



he wasn't interested. If he really wanted, he could effortlessly have ten just like her, yet they all would still lack something. There was just no thrill in bedding her, just another line he could then mark on his wall of conquests. And that, he didn't want anymore. Tony thought about it for a moment, watching as the bartender mixed her drink. Maybe it was because of Pepper? She wasn't just a boring, mindless one-night stand. She was a remarkable woman, smart, resourceful and very capable of being the CEO he never could. She was challenging him every day, maybe not in the science department, but nonetheless interesting. Yes, they parted ways, but still remained friends, just a bit awkward at the beginning. And maybe that was what he was looking for now (was he even looking?), not only a beautiful body, but a beautiful mind too?

The blonde was still looking at him invitingly, but he just smiled again and kept sipping his whiskey and scanning the colorful crowd. After being ignored for a few more minutes she finally stood up with a huff and went away.

However she wasn't the only one to approach the billionaire that night. There was actually a lot of single women at the party, or perhaps their partners were elsewhere and a night with Tony Stark was definitely something worth bragging about.

After the eighth or maybe ninth attempt of women trying to get his attention Tony noticed a strange pattern. He was totally unimpressed by the blondes. He used to favor them before, but now they all seemed plain and all alike. There was a nice redhead, and he even exchanged a few words with her, but ultimately let her leave without him. After some more boring hours of observing people coming and going, his eyes appeared to be scanning for a specific type of women. Tall, slender, dark-haired... At first he didn't make the connection, but when it finally dawned on him he almost dropped his tumbler. They all, in some way, resembled a certain god whom commandeered his workshop's sofa and refused to share. It seems he did the same with Tony's thoughts, the inventor observed as another raven-haired beauty crossed the dance floor towards the bar. She ordered a dirty vodka martini and sat nearby. The inventor glanced at her and his brain instantly started to compare her with Loki. The women's lips were fuller, and the cheek-bones appeared to be more accented by makeup than truly sharp. And her eyes... they were a pretty blue, almost Thor-like, but Tony felt kind of disappointed. It wasn't what he wanted to see. When his brain caught with that thought, the billionaire scowled at his whiskey and downed it in one go. It would seem he was royally screwed.

~

It was probably around 10 PM. Tony was after his third whiskey and quite a bit tipsy. At some point Pepper forced him to do rounds with her to greet the important guests. He finally managed to run away and hide at some balcony. It was so cold outside that even his booze wasn't helping in keeping him warm, but the night sky shone with myriads of stars, a sight not easy to witness in always brightly lit New York. So he stayed a moment longer, trying to not freeze to death. The cold through reminded him of Loki again. He wondered what the god was doing right now. Was he still in the workshop, the Avengers' cube clicking between his elegant, slim fingers? Tony secretly liked to watch him play with it, it was enthralling. The mere thought of what he could do with those fingers.... The billionaire almost choked on his whiskey. The image his mind supplied was definitely rated NC-17. Was he fantasizing about the god now? Or was it the alcohol warming him in weird ways? It was definitely time to go back inside. Yup. No reason to freeze out here. Evacuate before his brain would flood him with another dose of strangely arousing images, like for example Loki's fingers tracing patterns on Tony's face. Damn he could still feel them hovering over his lips...

He finished the whiskey in one go and opened the doors to the ball room. Instantly a wave of hot air enveloped him and he got lightheaded. Stark grunted and tried to regain his balance. Thank god

no one saw him, flustered and swaying, the gossipers would have a field day and Pepper would definitely kill him. The dizziness finally subsided, but left him kind of weak in the knees, so Tony slowly made his way towards the bar to sit and not look drunk. In fact he didn't really drink that much so it came as a surprise that it affected him so. Once there, he ordered an iced water with a lemon slice and mint to shake him up a bit. It seemed nobody noticed his absence, so his theory that he wasn't needed here still stood. Well, he had to make a speech earlier, about the luck of being born in a rich family, where he could have everything he wished for, and where his talents were nurtured without any obstacles. And how lucky and grateful he was for that. No biggie that Howard bullied him into studying, constantly demanding better and better results. It was the only thing he could do for Howard to even notice him. But to the public his father was still a great innovator, not an absent parent, always neglecting his only child in favor of his prized inventions. As a child Tony sometimes imagined how his life would look like if they weren't rich, but the only conclusion he always came to appeared to be just as grim as the reality. Howard would probably end up drunk every night and he would unload his frustrations either on Maria or Tony. And there would not be Jarvis to save him...

Tony slumped against the bar. Way to go to lift the mood. Now he was mildly drunk, depressed and bored. What a lovely evening it was indeed. He wanted to go home badly. To maybe find some better company, or even to get drunk properly alone and then pass out into a dreamless sleep. Yeah, that sounded just right. He was about to go find Pepper and tell her he had enough and was going home when his phone vibrated in his pocket. He set an alert for emergencies and Jarvis was instructed to play it even when the phone was muted. In fact if Tony's phone occurred to be turned off entirely (which, in truth didn't happen often) and the emergency was really urgent, the AI could turn it on again remotely to notify its owner of the situation.

Stark fished the device from his jacket's pocket and glanced at the screen where an alert was flashing with angry red letters.

'Talk to me J,' Tony commanded.

*'Sir, there's a situation at the Avengers Tower. Agents Romanoff and Barton have returned from their mission and encountered mister Laufeyson in the common kitchen - alone.'*

'Fuck! I'm on my way!'

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 9

Tony's phone vibrated in his pocket. He fished the device out and glanced at the screen.

'Talk to me J,' Stark commanded.

*'Sir, there's a situation at the Avengers Tower. Agents Romanoff and Barton have returned from their mission and encountered mister Laufeyson in the communal kitchen, alone.'*

Tony's blood ran cold. If Loki was on his own, there was no telling what he might do to defend himself against the two assassins. Or what they might do to him, because let's face it, Loki wasn't on top off his game recently. And if Barton was still pissed, the situation could turn from bad to dramatic in seconds.

The inventor quickly scanned the large hall for Pepper, but couldn't spot her anywhere. It was crowded with rich people, laughing and drinking and donating to the Maria Stark Foundation as he frantically examined all those unfamiliar faces for the one he really needed right now. He was wasting time he didn't have.

'Status,' he barked at the phone.

*'Agent Romanoff is currently restraining mister Laufeyson against the floor, sir. I notified mister Odinson and doctor Banner. They are on their way. ETA: 2 minute, 45 seconds.'* the AI replied into the earpiece Stark retrieved out of his pocket.

'Jesus...' Tony gasped. He was sprinting out of the ballroom, down the stairs and towards the parking lot. He could apologize to Pepper later, this took precedence. And then a thought occurred to him. Loki didn't take kindly to touch... And if the Widow was pinning him down...

'Jarvis is he fighting back?'

Tony bypassed the valet in a rush and then stopped at the parking lot disoriented. He didn't know where his car was parked. Cursing under his breath the engineer strode between a Bentley and a Jaguar. He was breathing shallowly and sweat started pouring down his brow. Where the fuck was his car?!

*'Yes sir.'* The AI's voice was like a slap. *'But in his condition, he's not very successful.'*

The billionaire could picture it. Loki was stronger than a normal human, but Natasha wasn't a *normal* human and she was trained to restrain bigger opponents than her. Loki would use his miniscule reserves of magic to defend himself and if he panicked, he would deplete them quickly, to then be left vulnerable. He probably would not try to kill them unless his own life was threatened, but he was alone, weaponless, blind and the assassins outnumbered him. Tony wasn't sure who was more lethal in this situation and he really didn't want to find out.

Suddenly, a flash to his right, courtesy of his AI, notified him of his car's whereabouts. He jumped

into the R8 and the engine started without his prompting. Jarvis was a blessing. Tony promised himself that he would clean his coding from useless crap at the first opportunity he got. He reared out of the parking space and raced towards the exit.

'Jarvis text Pepper and tell her I'm out and connect me to Natasha, stat!'

Stark took a sharp turn not even sparing a glance at the traffic's lights. He probably broke at least 20 laws along the way, but his mind wandered elsewhere and supplied him with a vast amount of tragic scenarios.

Finally the line clicked and his eardrum got assaulted by the sound of breaking glass. He almost drove into a truck because of it. Fuck!

'Natasha! Natasha!' he shouted while bypassing three cars in a row. Where the fuck was Bruce and Thor?!

'Stop! Shit. Don't fight him!'

'Stark?' The spy's voice was cold and she was panting slightly. The engineer could hear Loki snarling from somewhere further away. 'Why is there a wanted criminal in your kitchen?'

'There is a reason. I can explain...just...' He was interrupted by the elevator doors opening and a loud '**BROTHER!**' Tony was maybe 5 minutes away from the tower. Thankfully there were no cops around to bother him. Over the earpiece he could hear a sound of glass being crushed under someone's boot and Thor's enraged voice.

'What is the meaning of this?! What have you done to my brother?!'

The inventor grimaced. At last someone showed up, and he just hoped Loki wasn't injured.

'Guys, guys calm down. I'll be there in a few minutes, just try not to kill each other till then.'

He left Jarvis to monitor the situation and concentrated on driving. It wouldn't do if he crashed on a lamp post just outside the tower.

He parked at the curb in front of the main entrance with a loud screech and jumped out of the car practically colliding with Steve. The engineer managed to pivot around him in the last second cursing left and right.

'Whoa Tony! Where's the fire?' Cap asked. He reached out to support Stark, his other hand occupied with a bag of groceries.

'Clint and Natasha are in the tower.' Tony hissed righting himself. 'And they found Loki.'

The soldier's eyes went wide for a second, but he recovered quickly. Without further delay they entered the large lobby, lined with chrome and dark oak wood, and went straight to the elevator. The inventor's mind didn't even record the receptionist's cheerful 'Good evening mister Stark', as it was too preoccupied with conjuring images of Loki's blood dripping on the common kitchen's floor. He waited for the elevator doors to close and demanded from his AI.

'Jarvis update.'

*'By doctor Banner's suggestion the party has relocated to the lounge sir. They are awaiting your arrival.'*

'Loki?'

*'He is also present. Agent Romanoff refused to let him leave.'*

The billionaire looked at Steve. At a first glance he appeared to be calm, Tony on the other hand felt like a caged animal. He wanted to pace the small, confining space and growl at somebody. His insides were twisting themselves in knots and he was just so fucking worried it was ridiculous.

'What about Clint?' Cap asked. 'How is he behaving?'

'Agent Barton hasn't uttered a word yet sir. He is only staring intensely at mister Laufeyson.'

The engineer wasn't sure if it was good or bad. Clint was a fun guy when you came to know him better, but he was also a trained, deadly assassin. As far as Tony was concerned Hawkeye might be plotting how to slit Loki's throat on the nearest occasion.

The doors finally chimed and opened. Tony and Steve stepped out only to be instantly met with tense, heavy silence.

'Ah! The family is whole again!' Stark said instead of a greeting. He was answered by cold and accusatory glares from the assassins and relieved one from Bruce. Tony noticed that Loki occupied an armchair slightly out of the way, but still in a perfect view. Natasha sat on the sofa facing the others and Clint lurked in the background taunt like his bowstring.

'No welcome hugs and kisses? I'm disappointed.' the inventor continued, subtly trying to reduce the distance between him and Loki. A fierce kind of protectiveness buzzed insistently in his veins. He glanced at the god before quickly focusing on Clint and then Natasha, assuming she would be the one to do the talking. The Trickster's skin was ashen pale against a warm-brown leather of the armchair. His lips were pressed in a thin line and his palms lay flat against the armrests, probably to prevent Natasha from noticing how they shook. In Loki's mind she was considered an enemy, thus showing any weaknesses was out of the question.

Tony crossed the room seemingly casually and stopped near the gods. Thor was sitting close to his brother wanting to protect him in case of a surprise attack.

'Stark.' Natasha almost growled. Well if she had trouble concealing her emotions, things were probably very bad. It would be the best to remove Loki from her and Barton's immediate reach as soon as possible, before the tension became too much.

'Care to explain what a wanted murderer is doing in your house?' She asked, finally managing to hide her anger under a carefully crafted mask of indifference.

'Um taking a refuge? If you haven't noticed he's kinda post torture.' He explained.

'And good riddance.' The engineer heard Clint's snort. Stark grated his teeth, but kept his mouth shut for once.

Steve meanwhile sat next to Bruce and observed the situation, ready to step in if necessary.

Natasha didn't even spare a glance at the god, she was keenly staring at Tony, but the billionaire wasn't fooled, both assassins observed the raven-haired god's every move.

'And why S.H.I.E.L.D. hasn't been notified of the convict's whereabouts?'

The inventor noticed a small satisfied smile blooming on Barton's lips. He was probably imagining



all the creative ways S.H.I.E.L.D. would want to deal with the Jotun. It made Tony's blood boil.

'Because it's none of their damn business.' He growled, all hints of mirth leaving his features. 'It was agreed upon that his sentence was to be conducted on Asgard and it obviously got executed thoroughly.'

'S.H.I.E.L.D. has to know about all potential treats...' Natasha recited dispassionately.

'S.H.I.E.L.D. can go fuck themselves.' Tony put a reassuring hand on the Trickster's shoulder and squeezed lightly.

Steve groaned from the other side of the sofa at his choice of words.

'He needs to be contained and monitored as...'

'He is **NOT** a fucking animal with rabies! And believe me Natasha. If any of you as much as squeaks something about Loki to Fury or S.H.I.E.L.D. so help me god it will be the last thing you do.' Stark promised calmly.

A heavy silence had befallen the room. Everyone, except Loki, looked at Tony in various states of shock or in Cap's case - concern, but he fucking didn't care. 'Come,' he addressed the younger god. His head pounded as hell, so did his damaged heart and he wanted to be away from them as soon as possible. Loki stood gracefully and followed him out.

'Stark! We aren't done yet!' Natasha shouted after them.

'I am.' Tony responded, not once looking back.

~

*His skin prickled with dread and a blink of an eye later a cold, deadly-sharp blade pressed against his throat.*

*'Give me the satisfaction,' a voice hissed right next to his ear.*

*He knew that voice, but had a hard time placing a face to it, concentrating instead on breathing shallowly enough to not cut his skin on the knife.*

*It was dark all around and he felt vulnerable and exposed, the minuscule weight of his attacker promptly pressed against his back heightened his panic further. He wanted to shake her off, but was wary of the blade.*

*'Just fucking slit his throat,' another voice snarled somewhere behind them. 'I can be satisfied with watching him bleed to death.' It was so full of malice and loathing, he was barely able to suppress a shudder.*

*'No,' the female answered. 'I want information.'*

*She forced his head back even more, yanking the locks with enough force to almost rip them out.*

*'What are you doing here and what did you do with the others?' She growled, the blade so close to his skin now, he could feel beads of blood forming on the cut it left behind.*

*His insides were twisting painfully, but he managed to make his voice sound almost bored.*

*'Why, did you miss me, agent Romanoff?'*

*Before he had time to react she slammed his head hard on the kitchen tiles and pain flooded his senses.*

Tony opened his eyes with a gasp. He was breathing hard and his head was pounding. Again.

'Jarvis lights.' he grunted. Instantly the bedroom was illuminated in pleasant yellow hues.

'Sir, mister Laufeyson...' the AI started.

'Yeah, I know. Getting up now.'

The billionaire shuddered when the cool air assaulted his bare arms and legs, but didn't stop to dress himself properly. It wasn't that cold and he had a more pressing matter to attend to.

He regretted his decision the instant he entered the god's bedroom. It was freezing there and Tony could even spy frost on the windows.

Loki was tossing on the bed and keening quietly. The sheets were twisted around his legs, restraining his movements, but the god's chest was bare and heaving with short distressed gasps.

Stark approached cautiously, grabbed the god by the shoulders and shook him.

'Wake up! You hear me Bambi? Wake up!'

Loki screamed and his eyes flew open. Tony loosened his grip, but his hands remained steadily pressed to the god's forearms messaging slowly.

'It's alright, you're safe, you're safe.' the engineer whispered.

Loki looked towards him, his eyes glazed and haunted. He trembled, Tony observed, and without thinking gathered him into a tight hug. The god stilled startled, and even stopped breathing for a moment, but to the inventor's relief (after his brain caught with what his body had done) didn't struggle or push him away. He might have, in fact, hugged him back just a little, but the genius' brain was currently repeating on a loop: *ohshitohshitlamhugginganorsegod!* Yet at the same time his palms were running over the Trickster's back in a soothing motion.

They sat like that for an undetermined amount of time, until Loki finally relaxed and his breath stopped coming out in ragged gasps. Tony was murmuring all those 'you're safe', 'I'm here', 'you're not alone's and at the same time thinking about the dream itself. Obviously, it has been triggered by Natasha's attack.

When they were parting ways after Stark brought them back to his penthouse Loki seemed more exhausted rather than shaken. Of course Tony asked if the god needed anything, but the answer was no. On the other hand he himself wasn't in the best condition - drunk and with a splitting headache, he had to admit it was easy to be fooled by the god's poker face.

Finally Loki shifted in his arms and Tony let him disentangle himself. He looked the god in the face searching for any signs of distress, but found none.

'You wanna go to the workshop?' the inventor blurted out.

Well, it wasn't actually a bad idea. There really was no chance for them to fall asleep again tonight, so why not use that time to be productive at least. 'Yeah come on. I'll make you hot cocoa and we'll

do some science.' The inventor decided as he stood up pulling Loki after him.

~

They barely had time to settle in their usual spots when Jarvis' concerned voice filled the workshop.

'Sir I have been running monthly diagnostics and found something noteworthy.' An array of columns and charts flooded the displays in front of the inventor, all regarding the arc reactor. Tony frowned while he studied them carefully. What the data indicated should not be possible.

'Do them again,' he ordered. 'It looks like you miscalculated.'

'I did, sir. Three times.'

Tony then lifted his shirt and took a good look at the reactor. It appeared exactly the same, no scratches or any other kind of damage was visible on its surface. The engineer even took it out of his chest, mindful not to disconnect the wire, and checked if the thing was intact. Not noticing anything out of order he carefully replaced it back in.

'Any changes?'

'The energy loss is significantly lower than half an hour ago, but still exceeds the normal speed by 2.17%, sir.'

It wasn't that big of an amount, considering the arc reactor almost didn't lose energy unless he was using the Iron man suit, but it was still there and Tony didn't know why. He didn't like not knowing. And earlier the energy loss spiked to about 5.63%, yet he didn't do anything to cause it. He was with Loki while he... Tony spun around in his chair to look at the god. He was curled on the sofa, the blue blanket wrapped tightly around his slim body, a cup of steaming cocoa warming his hands. The god's head lay on the backrest, dark locks covering half of his face. He looked pale and exhausted.

Tony's eyes narrowed. Was he being played? He had to admit, his guard was unusually low around the Trickster, and the guy wasn't called the God of Lies for nothing. Was it possible that he found a way to sap the energy from his reactor and convert it into magic? It was similar to the Tesseract's, so Tony supposed it was doable.

'Lokes,' he called. The god twitched and out of habit opened his eyes to look at him, eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

'Yes?' he asked the inventor.

Tony observed him closely, suddenly wary.

'I need to go down to Bruce's lab for a... thing. Be back in a sec.'

The Trickster only hummed in response, taking a sip from his cup. Tony left him on the sofa, mind buzzing with questions. What if it was all a game? Loki said he couldn't heal himself, but what if he could and was playing them all along. Hell, what if this all was an elaborate plan to make them trust him just so he could then stab them in the back. He could have easily deceived Thor, the big blond always had a soft spot for his younger brother.

The inventor rested his head on the cold wall of the cubicle. Maybe he was being paranoid and it was some kind of freak accident? Maybe it would be better not to jump to conclusion just yet?

In all truth, he had to admit, he really liked the god's company. They clicked almost from the start, with Loki being so insanely smart and all. It was... attractive. The billionaire grimaced. He was attracted not only to the god's body, but also his mind, it was a dangerous combination and so very alluring. Rarely someone understand him so and was able to keep up in conversation. Of course Loki wasn't from Earth and a myriad of things he didn't understand, but Tony thought, given time the god would definitely learn.

He didn't even notice when he arrived at his destination until Jarvis' voice asked:

*'Sir, are you alright?'*

'Fine,' he rasped opening his eyes. The elevator took him to Bruce's floor as intended. As he stepped out of the box Tony noticed that the lights were still on, so his science buddy had to be somewhere nearby. He wasn't in a mood for company, but it was too late to retreat when he spotted the doctor coming his way.

'Tony? Did something happen? Are you alright?'

He had to look bad if everyone asked him that. Trying and failing to put on his casual mask, the inventor sighed and raked a hand through his unruly hair.

'I don't know,' he answered truthfully. 'Jarvis?'

'Scan in progress sir.' The AI replied instantly.

'What is going on?' Bruce asked, worry coloring his voice.

'Sir, the increased energy loss has stopped.'

Tony's stomach dropped.

'I think he might have a problem.' he croaked, closing his eyes as sharp stab of grief pierced his racing heart.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 10

'To the left Iron man, YOUR LEFT!'

'Uh don't shout at me Cap, or I'll start stuttering.' Tony grunted while banking hard in the right direction this time and avoiding few energy blasts from Hydra soldiers. Why did they have to attack so early in the morning, while Tony was having a major hangover? He could barely see. He felt like his brain was leaking out through his ears and Steve's voice kept drilling massive holes in his skull.

Tony shot down another big-gun-wielding Hydra moron. What were they even trying to accomplish here? Your friendly villain initiative, or what? Goddamn it, he was too sleepy for this, he needed coffee.

'Iron man do you copy?' Cap's agitated voice assaulted his mortified ears again.

'Jarvis, be a dear and lower the volume, daddy's got a headache.' Tony slurred.

'You're drunk? Jesus man, it's 10 in the morning.' Barton laughed. 'Your boy-toy kicked you out of bed last night?' He mocked.

Tony grit his teeth. He really wanted to forget what happened the night before, but now, thanks to stupid Hawkeye, the events from yesterday assaulted his mind with double force. And at the forefront was Loki's face when he told him he wanted to be left alone, right after he came back from Bruce's lab. The god played it cool, but Tony knew he was hurt. And everything went to hell after that. The billionaire fished a bottle of scotch from his stash and drank himself into oblivion. It felt like he barely closed his eyes for a few minutes and the stupid alarm went off, almost giving him a heart attack.

'Hung-over,' he grunted lifting one goon into the air and tossing him at his comrades.

'Loki left you high and dry?' the Hawk snorted.

'God, Barton are you fucking jealous or something? I saw how you ogled him last time.' Tony sneered enraged. If Thor wasn't with Jane today, he would make a bloody pulp out of this fucker. Clint has been throwing smartass innuendos all morning at him about Loki, and Tony was at the end of his rope. He performed a hard U turn, dislodged two Hydra mercs from their perch and shot a weak repulsor blast at Clint's feet.



'Screw you Stark!'

'Yeah, right at you buddy.'

'ENOUGH!' Cap roared over the comm. 'We are supposed to be a team and you're jumping at your throats like some street dogs.'

'He started it.' Tony grumbled and muted the comm away. It was time to end this game and finally get some coffee.

He was just rounding a skyscraper in search of more Hydra footmen when a powerful blast caught him straight in the chest, right above the arc reactor. He somersaulted backwards and went directly through a front window of a bakery. After a moment of intense pain and disorientation, Stark scrambled to his feet. Now he was truly pissed. He blasted to the streets, repulsors roaring, and meticulously started removing every Hydra soldier on his path. Fifteen minutes later the fight was over.

~

'You are back. Are you hurt?' Loki jumped to his feet just as Tony entered the lounge.

'A few cuts and scratches, nothing major.' The inventor sighed. He didn't really expect to find the god waiting for him. He wasn't ready to deal with this situation yet.

'Let me then...' Loki made a step in his direction.

'Nah, there's no need, Bruce patched me up.' Tony dismissed the god's offer with a shrug.

'But...'

'I said NO!' The inventor almost shouted taking a step back from the god.

Loki halted mid-step, one hand outstretched towards the genius. Lowering it slowly, he schooled his face into an impassive mask, but Tony managed to notice the hurt in his eyes. Instantly his heart sank and he felt like a complete asshole, but he still wasn't sure of the god's intentions, so he preferred to play it safe.

'I'm tired,' he sighed, trying to cover his uneasiness around the other, but when he peered at the immortal again, the bored mask was in place, that glimpse of hurt buried deep underneath it.

'I understand.' The god said coldly. 'I shall take my leave then and let you rest undisturbed.' he pivoted on his heels and left the billionaire alone.

Tony swore under his breath. He wanted to run after him and explain, but he didn't dare. It was such a mess. He raked a hand through his sweaty hair and grimaced. A cold shower was in order. Maybe it could cool his running thoughts or numb his racing heart.

~

It took Loki three days to truly comprehend that something was off. At first, he justified Stark's increased absence with work concerning his company. But then he started noticing other discrepancies in the mortal's behavior. He seemed distant, deep in thoughts, as if his brain constantly analyzed some complicated puzzle, unable to solve it.

Loki attributed it to the tension that had befallen the tower after the assassin's duo return.

After their first encounter the god avoided leaving Tony's floor, not wanting to find himself again in an disadvantageous position against the assassin's duo and to successfully outsmart them if the need arose. He was content to spend his time with the inventor in his workshop, but even that had gradually come to an end. If he thought carefully about it, it was probably around the time of their latest shared nightmare that Tony's attitude towards him changed. When he returned from the doctor's laboratory he seemed pensive and after a short while asked Loki to leave.

It would appear the human had enough of Loki's meddling in his dreams, and the god couldn't really blame him for it.

It was frustrating, this inability to control his powers. Loki felt like a child again, trying to wield his gifts and failing again and again. The difference this time was that he had all the knowledge to succeed, yet he was failing in his endeavors either way. He wanted to scream and destroy things, but knew better than to try. Stark was displeased with him, yet he hadn't had a real clue why, only speculations, and it was reason enough to tread cautiously. He didn't want to lose the alliance with the genius human, he came to like...

It was baffling how a mortal could be this interesting. He visited Midgard many times in the past, but no one ever spiked his curiosity like Stark did. It felt refreshing to interact with someone witty and intelligent for a change, someone who appreciated mischief almost as much as Loki did and understood it without the god's lengthy explanations.

Loki was reluctant to admit to himself, but he missed the human's never-ending chatter, laughter, and banter with his AI.

Now that he thought about it, even Jarvis seemed colder, his answers more clipped, as if his creator's mood reflected also upon him. Something has changed and he wasn't privy to it. Stark kept his mouth shut and so did his AI, figuratively speaking, and Loki couldn't employ all his gifts to get to the root of the problem.

~

After the fifth day of being constantly alone Loki was almost clawing the walls in frustration. His solitude has been disturbed only twice, since Stark's apparent loss of interest in his company; once by doctor Banner, who came to check how the god was doing, and chat for a moment. He excused himself almost immediately after, and once again left the god to his own devices and dark thoughts. The second visit was from his brother, but at the time Loki was in such a sour mood, that Thor didn't stay long either, put off by the Trickster's behavior.

The god sighed and threw himself at the sofa. There was nothing for him to do. Lately all his time has been occupied by Stark and his insanely brilliant inventions, and now that he has been excluded from participating in that brilliance Loki noticed how much he got used to it and how its absence has affected him mood.

The Trickster grit his teeth. He grew dependent of the mortal, something that should have never had happened. He cursed himself for that weakness and Thor for bringing him here in the first place. But above all else he cursed Odin. He could have flayed him, imprisoned him, even sentenced to death, but instead he chose to make him weak and dependent on others. In his twisted sense of justice he even let Loki stay here, amongst enemies, in this new golden cage, where he was sure his wayward, adopted son was being keenly observed.

In a fit of rage at his helplessness Loki threw an object closest to him at the nearest wall. It happened to be the toy cube Stark himself has devised for him. Startled, the immortal scrambled to his feet to retrieve it, silently praying for it to not be broken. It took him one stressful moment to

locate the cube. Apparently it bounced off the wall and rolled under a cupboard. The god reverently picked it up and sat back down on the sofa. With a few well practiced twists he checked if the mechanism was still intact, and then quickly started solving the puzzle. When the last row of colors finally clicked in place, Tony's slightly digitalized voice sounded from within the toy: *You did it Bambi! Good job! Try again?*

Involuntarily, a strangled cry tore itself from the Trickster's throat, and he hugged the damn toy from the trice be damned mortal close to his chest. He missed the stupid man and his stupid laughter, and all the atrocious monikers he called Loki with. He wanted to sit again on the torn sofa, down in the workshop and listen to the mortal's muttered curses when some project of his didn't go exactly as planned. But he was too prideful to beg. He would rather rot here alone, before he would let himself be subjected to such shame. And he might as well get used to loneliness, he may spend a long time here, alone and forgotten.

~

Tony cursed viciously and punched the worktable. Even when pain flooded his senses the frustration wouldn't go away. He angrily scrapped the whole project and wanted to start a new one, but Bruce's concerned voice disrupted his concentration.

'Tony you haven't slept in three days, you should take a break.'

The inventor just snorted rudely. What were three sleepless days for him when he was on a roll? Dismissing the doctor's worries, he opened a new file. What to name it...? Ah yes. *I don't fucking need anyone* sounded just right.

The engineer reached for his coffee, actively trying to ignore Bruce's worried look, but missed. Instead he knocked the mug from the table and it shattered loudly on the floor, leaving a big, almost black stain right next to his chair.

'Fuck!' Tony exclaimed as he stood up to avoid the mess. 'Dummy!' he shouted, 'A job for you.'

The little robot whirred cautiously closer, wary of his creator's mood. Only yesterday he was yelled at for accidentally knocking some metal parts to the floor. He started moping the spilled coffee and Tony moved further away to give him more space.

He knew he was acting ridiculously, but it was either that or scotch, and he kinda promised Pepper (again), he would try not to drink so much.

Stark raked a hand through his hair and sighed. The distractions weren't working. He couldn't concentrate on anything, his thoughts constantly returning to a certain god few floors up. He felt used and hurt, but he didn't know how to handle this situation. Once again he got close to somebody and got betrayed. It would seem it was a reoccurring pattern with him.

'Tony.' Bruce murmured laying a hand on the inventor's shoulder. He then gently pushed him towards the exit. 'You need sleep.' the doctor decided and there was no use arguing with him.

'Bruce,' Tony started, 'I don't... I don't want...' *to see him* was left unsaid, but the scientist understood.

'There is a guest room on my floor, you can crash there tonight if you want, but eventually you will have to deal with this situation and confront him.'

'I know. I just... I was a fool and he played me.' The engineer sighed again, defeated.

'You like him, it is understandable that you feel hurt.' The doctor patted him on the back as they stepped into the elevator.

'I don't *like him*. It was just uh... interesting to have him around.' Tony stared at the opposite wall. He felt really tired suddenly, but he was afraid to go to sleep. His brain would conjure the weirdest shit when left wandering, and he didn't want to over analyze his supposedly not existing feelings towards Loki.

The elevator abruptly stopped and they entered Bruce's rooms. Tony wasn't here that often, but knew the layout by heart, actually, he remembered the schematics for every floor. His steps faltered as they neared his room for the night. He was legitimately afraid to go to sleep. What if Loki's dreams would reach him even here? And then it hit him. What if Loki had another nightmare? Would Tony rush to him or would he leave him alone to deal with it? He really didn't know the answer. And what if the god had nightmares, but Tony was too far to share them, and Jarvis wouldn't notify him? His AI became kind of overly protective after discovering the initial anomaly with the power loss. His imagination chose this moment to lift its ugly head and remind him the last time Loki's dreams had woken him up, and how distressed the Trickster had been. *Why now?!* Tony wanted to shout. It was bad enough before, he didn't need that too. And the worst part was, that he couldn't be truly certain if anything the god did was genuine or pretended. He was the God of Lies and Tricks for fuck's sake!

'Bruce I need sleeping pills.' he blurted out. 'I want to pass out instantly.'

The doctor just looked over Stark's unusually pale complexion and sighed.

'I'll see what I can do.'

~

'Brother! BROTHER!' A mighty bellow pierced through the thick veil of fear and pain to help Loki untangle himself from yet another night terror. The god whimpered when, even after opening his eyes, he was still drowning in darkness. Strong arms encircled his lithe frame and a new wave of panic hit him straight in the solar plexus. He started tossing in the embrace and clawing at the offenders flesh, but he only got restrained more firmly. Another panicked wail tore itself from the black-haired god's throat and the iron clad embrace finally loosened a little, and then vanished entirely. Loki moved away and his back hit the sofa cushions. He was trapped. Suddenly a warm palm touched his damp cheek and the Trickster jerked away.

'Loki... Brother.' Thor whispered and only then the younger god's memory kicked in and supplied him with an explanation of the whole situation. He was in Stark Tower, locked among enemies, left alone to go insane in his confinement.

'Thor?' he rasped, throat dry as parchment.

'What ails you?' the Thunderer asked, once again reaching towards his sibling to smooth his unruly hair.

'Thor! Take me away from here! Take me back to Asgard! Jotunheim even! I cannot stand being here any longer!'

'What are you saying Loki? You are safe here. If you are afraid of the Hawk and Lady Widow I shall have words with them.' the blond god promised while his fingers gently carded through his brother's long, black locks.

'You do not understand.' the Trickster whispered and leaned more into the touch. It reminded him of his mother. She did exactly the same thing when Loki was but a boy, as he clung to her skirts scared by some prank or story of Thor's and his companions.

'You should rest brother, I will stand watch over you.' Thor offered as he guided Loki's head back on the pillow. The Trickster murmured incoherently, his eyes drifting shut once again, lulled by his brother's soft voice. A lullaby he hummed, one from the days long past, when they were both young and happy. It eased Loki's fears and let him drift into a dreamless sleep.

~ ~ ~



## Chapter 11

Loki woke up to Thor's loud snoring. He could recognize that infernal sound everywhere.

The Trickster stretched lazily, accidentally kicking his brother in the shin, but the Thunder God only snored louder and shifted on the bed. Rolling to the other side and facing his sibling Loki called out:

'Jarvis what time is it?'

'It's 4:37 a.m. sir.' the AI responded instantly.

Nodding his head in thanks Loki outstretched a hand and poked Thor in the side.

'Brother,' he murmured, but to no avail, the Thunderer was dead to the world. 'Thor!' he tried again, this time louder. Finally the body beside him stirred, grumbling incoherently.

'Loki?' the blond slurred. 'How are you feeling?'

'Better,' the younger admitted reluctantly. And it was the truth. He hasn't slept this good in many nights. Then memories of the events from yesterday came crashing down on him and he felt ashamed by his outburst and lack of restraint.

'Thank you,' Loki whispered, and to mask his embarrassment he started poking Thor in the ribs with bony fingers.

'Stop it!' Thor laughed, swatting at his hand playfully.

'Sir, may I remind you that you have an appointment with doctor Foster.' Jarvis interjected.

'That is indeed true,' the older brother laughed again, single handedly pinning the younger to the mattress. Loki growled underneath him, and tried to knee him in the gut.

'It is 9:46 a.m. in London sir. I would advise you to make haste if you wish to be there by the afternoon.'

The god nodded and addressed his brother, all playfulness evaporating from his voice. 'Are you truly better?'

'Yes, now go to your woman, before she decides your time together hinders her from accomplishing greatness through her science.'

Thor released him cautiously, eyeing the Trickster's lithe hands for a sign of a surprise tickle attack and swiftly stood up pulling Loki to his feet after him. The younger brother yelped startled when suddenly his ribcage got crushed in strong brotherly hug.

'Never doubt that I love you,' Thor whispered against his temple, and then kissed him on the forehead.

'Go now, before I kick you out,' the mage chided swatting him on the biceps.

The Thunderer finally let him go and made a step back.

'Behave while I am gone,' he smiled.

Loki only waved a hand at him, because what could he do?

'Fare thee well.' And with that Thor was gone. Instantly, the Trickster's playful façade faded as he stood there alone. 'And you,' he whispered to the empty room.

~

It would seem Stark abandoned him entirely. Loki hasn't encountered him in many days and now he found another proof of his theory. The kitchen they used to have breakfast in, usually well stocked, now was empty. Obviously there were some leftovers, but after so many days of laying around unused they were all spoiled. Loki took out one last handful of cereals and ate it dry, because the milk smelled foul and even if he was desperate he would not touch it. The god sat at the counter and pondered his next step. It was still quite early, and the possibility that he would encounter anyone downstairs, in the communal kitchen was fairly low. As far as he knew, only the Captain was usually up at this hour. It was a risky plan, more so now since he was not in Stark's good graces, but ultimately he had no other choice. He also was reluctant to ask Jarvis for assistance, instinctively sensing his silent disapproval.

Loki dressed himself appropriately and stepped into the elevator.

'Communal floor please,' he addressed the all-seeing AI.

In a matter of seconds the box came to a stop and he warily left its safe walls, stepping silently and intensely listening for any sign of other occupants.

He was almost at the kitchen when a small sound coming from the common room caught his attention. He wanted to retreat immediately, confident he hasn't been discovered yet, and made a step back when suddenly something was thrown at his feet. Loki froze on the spot not knowing what it was. He tentatively reached with his miniscule amount of magic to investigate and when the image of the foreign object crystallized in his mind he swore silently. Of all the residents he had to encounter HIM.

A thud to his left notified him that another arrow embodied itself in the door frame.

'Don't move,' Barton growled.

~

'Yes Pepper,' the billionaire sighed, 'I signed every single one. No! I'm not dying and it's not a

middle age crisis. Stop! Do you know what time it is? Why are you even up? I just had some time on my hands... Yes. What about Loki?' Tony massaged his forehead. 'No, I haven't seen him lately. I didn't do anything! It was his... No, let's stop that. You have all the papers signed, send Happy for them later. I know it's tomorrow, Jarvis reminded me three times. I don't wanna go, it's boring.' he whined to the phone. 'Wait, I gotta go, Jarvis is flashing me an alert. I'll call you tomorrow. Bye.'

Tony disconnected the call and peered at the flashing screen.

'What is it buddy, I told you I was busy.'

Instead of answering, the AI projected a live feed from one of the camera's in the Tower. At first Tony only spotted Loki and wondered what was this all about. Did the god finally made a mistake and revealed that he was playing them all along?

He watched the immortal's rigid back, when a second window popped up next to the first, showing the common room with Hawkeye in it loosening an arrow at... Oh my god!

Tony scrambled to his feet so abruptly he knocked out the chair and it landed loudly on the floor. Without even sparing it a glance, the inventor raced to the elevator, his heart hammering hard against the arc reactor.

~

Loki tried to suppress a shudder that went down his body. He didn't even hear the projectile being released. He tensed anticipating another attack, but the seconds went by and nothing happened. Then suddenly sharp pain assaulted his senses; an arrow was sent so precisely by the assassin that it only grazed the god's cheek leaving a shallow, stinging wound that instantly started bleeding. Loki gasped and made a step back pressing a cold palm to the injury. Another arrow pierced the floor just behind him and the immortal instantly stopped in his tracks.

'I said: **DON'T. MOVE.**' Barton snarled. He was too far for Loki to exactly pin point his location with *Seiðr* and he moved too quietly to be heard over the cacophony from the television suddenly roaring to life. Loki had to admit it to himself, he stepped right into the trap.

'What is it that you want agent Barton?' the god asked, panic rising steadily in his veins. He was at a major disadvantage, unable to even locate his opponent or actively defend himself.

Instead answering the mortal asked.

'How does it fell to be at mercy of an ant? You don't feel so mighty anymore, do you, huh?'

The voice was moving, Loki observed, subtly trying to follow it with his body, when another arrow was sent lose to end up embodied in his thigh. The god screamed and dropped to one knee. He could hear the archer laugh somewhere in the room.

'Look who's kneeling now asshole,' Barton sneered.

The Trickster's body shook from the shock and helplessness. He was entirely at the other's mercy and the only thing that came to his mind the archer might want from him was to suffer. He saw no way out of this situation. His opponent was beyond reasoning, revenge the only thing on his mind.

Loki could feel a trickle of blood run down his thigh and damp the trousers around his knee.

His mind worked furiously to find a way out of this situation when the elevator pinged and its door slid open. A familiar voice reached his ears and he could almost faint from relief in that instant.

'WHAT THE FUCK?!' Tony shouted. He quickly made his way towards the god, his gaze searching for the attacker.

'Da fuck are you doing Clint?!' He yelled at his teammate, lurking on the other side of the room, near the windows.

Barton only shrugged like it was nothing.

'Just teaching the dog new tricks.'

'Get out,' Tony growled reaching an arm around the god to support him.

'What?'

'You heard me. Get the fuck out of my sight.'

The archer looked at him in disbelief. 'Dude, bros before hoes,' he laughed.

'Barton, I swear to god, if you don't leave this instant I will personally kick you out and trust me I won't even go for the suit.' Tony's voice shook from anger. He squeezed the Trickster's arm reassuringly.

'You're picking him before us? Is his ass that good you'd betray the Avengers?'

'You fucking dare?!' Stark boomed, rage filling his head with one word: murder. He was ready to rip Barton's trachea out with his bare hands, the buried protectiveness over the god resurfacing with might, when a light touch to his hand stopped him.

'Tony,' the god whispered. The inventor wasn't sure if it was from the blood loss or shock, maybe both. He looked at him then and his heart ached. He was sure Loki could fake a lot, but the vulnerability and relief he saw painted on the god's face made him instantly forget about his doubts. He lightly stroke Loki's uninjured cheek and smiled reassuringly.

'Let's get you out of here.' He gathered the Trickster into his arms and cautiously stood up, mindful not to aggravate his injury more. Loki's arms shot out and grasped his grease-stained t-shirt as a surprised yelp left his lips.

'It's okay,' Tony murmured against his black locks. A shudder ran down the broken god's body and he buried his face in the crook of Tony's neck.

'Jarvis, alert Bruce for me will you?'

'Already done sir.'

'Thanks.' He didn't even have to ask, the elevator doors soundlessly slid open as he stepped in with the god in his arms.

~

'What is that thing?' Bruce gasped examining the arrow stuck in the god's thigh. Its head had split upon contact and embodied itself deeply in the muscles and, the doctor suspected, bone. 'Is it one of yours?' He asked the inventor. Tony glanced at the bleeding wound and grimaced. The thing had wreaked havoc in the god's flesh. The tissue wasn't cut clean but shredded to pieces and it was going to be a bitch to stitch it back again.

'No,' he answered curtly, and averted his gaze to look Loki in the face. His eyes were closed and he

kept wheezing for air, fingers flexing on the hem of Tony's shirt. The inventor swore. A panic attack on top of everything. And to make matters worse the anesthesia Bruce administered wasn't working, so probably the painkillers were useless too. He rested his forehead against Loki's and whispered in the most steady voice he could muster.

'Hey Snowflake, you hear me?'

After two shaky inhales the god managed to steady himself enough to mutter.

'Tony...?'

'Yeah, it's me. Listen, you have a nasty wound that is bleeding really fast. We need to cut out the arrow from your thigh, but it is going to hurt like hell. Bruce doesn't want to overdose you, and we don't have time to experiment, because you may bleed out. You understand?'

The god nodded.

'Tony,' Bruce called, we need to hurry.' The doctor struggled to keep his calm, but it was getting harder by the second. The only thing grounding him was the knowledge that a patient was in need of his medical skills, and hulking out would help no one.

'Okay.' Tony exhaled feeling helpless.

The god squirmed on the bed and whimpered, hands clinging to the inventor's shirt.

'We're gonna help you Bambi.' He brushed a few strands of black locks from the god's damp forehead. It was weird, the wound was severe, but Loki got beat up by the Hulk and looked better than now.

'Bruce, something's not right.'

'You don't say...' the doctor grunted, preparing all the equipment they would need.

'No, look at him. He's a god for fuck's sake, this shouldn't be affecting him so.' He watched helplessly as Loki's fingers spasmed on the bed, twisting the cover, almost ripping it, and then something caught his attention. He lifted the sleeve on the immortal's arm that clung to his shirt and whistled. Odin's sigils, normally almost dormant, were now slithering underneath the Trickster's porcelain skin like vipers in their nest.

'The healing factor is magical in its nature?' Bruce asked looking repulsed.

'I have no fucking idea, but it looks like it. We better hurry, or he's gonna die of shock alone.'

'Yeah... Go and scrub your hands. You'll be assisting me.' Tony nodded and gently pried Loki's fingers off his shirt. 'I'll be right back.' he whispered to the feverish deity and quickly left to do as he was told taking a last glance at his god.

~

The procedure was bloody and went agonizingly slow. Tony was sure Loki's screams and feverish pleas would haunt his dreams for months to come, even without the Trickster's stray magic invading his sleep from time to time. He wanted to run fast and far away from this small white room filled with so much pain. Bruce (God bless his soul) tried to work as fast and as cautious as he could, but it wasn't always possible. It was a miracle in itself that he hasn't hulked out at all during this long and tedious surgery. The engineer was in awe of his amazing self-control.



At some point (Tony lost track of time pretty fast between assisting the doctor with the tools and cleaning away the god's blood from the wound) Loki finally succumbed to the pain and fainted, giving the two humans almost an heart attack, until Tony, with shaking fingers, found his pulse, erratic, but firm under his fingertips.

The one good news, in the sea of bad, was that the femoral artery wasn't damaged, otherwise they would have a dead god on their hands already.

Overall it took them almost five hours of utmost concentration to put Loki back together as best as they could.

At the beginning, the god's erratic healing powers almost fucked up their work, trying and, thanks to the sigils, failing to mend the wound. Tony suspected, that without those stupid markings, the wound wouldn't be worse than a broken bone, painful but non-lethal. But with them, fighting Loki's magic to heal himself, and thus causing him more pain that it was necessary, they were one step away from losing the god.

When they were done both Avengers were so tired and stressed, that after checking the god's vitals for the last time they almost collapsed on the spot.

Tony made Jarvis monitor Loki's health and went to seek refuge in his workshop until the god would wake.

He opened one of his stashes and took out a full bottle of scotch, unscrewed it and took a long swing, not even bothering to find a tumbler.

He wanted to erase this horror from his mind and booze was the only available option.

With Loki's screams still echoing in his mind Tony started drinking in earnest.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 12

It was raining heavily when Pepper stepped out of the car and Happy rushed to her with an umbrella. She smiled in thanks and they both hurried inside and out of the storm. If she didn't know that Thor went to London to meet up with Jane just earlier today, she would suspect it to be his doing.

Upon entering the lobby, the redhead headed straight to the elevator.

'Please don't wait for me,' she addressed Happy. 'I don't know what he did this time, but Jarvis sounded urgent, so it might take a while. Go home.'

'Okay boss. Call if you need anything.'

'I will, thank you. Jarvis what floor?'

*'The workshop ma'am.'* the AI replied closing the doors to the elevator.

'Let's go then.' the CEO huffed, mildly exasperated.

~

'Tony? Jarvis said you needed... me...' Pepper's voice trailed off as she entered the workshop and the scene before her unfolded. It was a mess. Bits and pieces of unfinished projects littered the ground, thrown from the workbenches in a fit of rage. Scorch marks, probably left by Iron man's repulsors, marred few of the tables and were still smoking. Tools lay around on the floor bundled together with discarded cables, sprinkled here and there with broken glass. And among all this mayhem sat Tony Stark, an almost empty bottle of scotch his only companion. Pepper's heart broke at the sight of her best friend and once-lover. He looked so lost and vulnerable with his forehead pressed firmly to his knees and hunched shoulders. She carefully stepped closed and sank down to kneel beside him.

'What happened?' she whispered laying a hand on his biceps. Tony flinched and lifted his face to look at her, eyes red and glazed from alcohol. It took a moment for his gaze to focus on her.

'I fucked up,' the inventor rasped and took another swing from the bottle. 'As usual.'

'What did you do?'

'Nothing, that's the problem. I've made a promise and I've broken it. I was supposed to keep him safe Pep and I screwed up,' he sniffed.

'Who? Loki? What... Where is he?' A feeling of dread crept over the redhead's spine. Did they have

a fight? Has something happened to the god? Did he escape? At least Tony wasn't badly injured, except for a few scratches on his hands.

'He's with Bruce in... in med bay,' Stark's voice cracked a little. 'He got attacked by Barton earlier. Jarvis notified me, but I came too late.'

Pepper's eyes widened. Is Loki...?

'He got shot,' the genius continued not noticing his CEO's distress, 'and we had to surgically remove the arrowhead from his leg, because it was lodged deeply in the bone.' Tony's voice and hands shook, so he took another swing of the booze to steady himself. 'We had to operate while he was still conscious, because the wound bled as fuck. We were worried that the arrow ruptured an artery, and the sedatives weren't working. Bruce was afraid to overdose him, and there was no time to run tests.'

A stray tear left the corner of Tony's eye and ran down his stained cheek. Pepper hugged him tightly, not minding the dark greasy smudges his hands left on her pristine white dress.

'I'm so sorry,' she whispered against his temple. 'Why was he even there,' she wondered out loud, 'you said he wouldn't leave your floor.'

'I... Don't know. Jarvis?'

*'He was searching for nourishments sir. You haven't restocked your personal kitchen in the last 8 days.'* Tony abruptly stood up, dislodging Pepper in the process, and hauled the almost empty bottle at the wall swearing profoundly.

'Why haven't you told me?!' he roared at his AI.

*'I did, sir. You seemed distracted.'* Jarvis explained calmly.

'Fuckfuckfuck! I'm such a loser. It was all my fault.' The billionaire started pacing frantically, hands flying up to grip his hair.

'Tony calm down! There's no use beating yourself over it now. What happened, happened. You better start thinking about what you can do to make it up to him.' Pepper advised, following his trek with her gaze. She hadn't seen him in such a state since Happy's run down with Extremis soldiers and even then he wasn't that enraged. Only looking at him like that made her realize just how much he cared for the god. She of course noticed his fascination with Loki, only thinking it to be merely on a scientific level, but now it occurred to her that maybe it was something more. Pepper gathered from Tony's increased babbling about the immortal, that they were very similar, him and Loki, both innovators, geniuses, often ostracized because of their vast knowledge and uncommon view of the world.

The redhead looked at her friend, the signs were definitely there, now that she thought about it.

'You like him,' she said with awe.

The statement stopped Stark in his track.

'What? What are you talking about?'

'You,' Pepper pointed a perfectly manicured finger at him, 'are attracted to Loki.'

'Yeah, he's brilliant. His knowledge is fascinating. What does this have to do with anything?' The

billionaire asked confused.

The CEO just shook her head. Of course he would not recognize the feeling, it took him years to notice his attraction to her.

'No Tony, you like him, in a romantic way.'

'Pepper what... Are you okay? I think you're overworked, you're starting to hallucinate. Jarvis make a note for Pep, she needs to go on vacation, maybe some nice spa or something?' he looked at her fleetingly and quickly averted his eyes again. Pepper stood up and put one hand on his shoulder blade - the muscles there were tense like a bow string.

'Tony,' she said softly, 'it is okay to like him.'

'I don't know if I...' Tony frowned. Some of his anger and self-loathing gave way to confusion and uneasiness. 'Pep I...'

'It's okay. You'll figure it out, you don't have to have all the answers right away.' As the inventor turned more towards her, she gently patted his scratchy cheek.

'I do, it comes with the description - genius, remember?' Tony smiled a thin smile, his eyes slowly warming up.

The redhead chuckled.

'This is not an engineering problem Tony, but I'm sure you'll solve it too, eventually. Now, why are you here and not in the med bay? You wouldn't want for him to wake up confused and alone, would you?'

'Bruce's there somewhere.' Tony mumbled.

She just glared at him.

'Okay, okay! You're the boss, I'm going, I'm going!' As they headed to the elevator Tony called over his shoulder. 'Dum-e, U, clean here up a little bit. It's a mess.'

The two bots whirled to life as their creator stepped into the elevator to fix his.

~

He was woken by pain, a dull throbbing sensation under his sternum. It radiated to all his limbs, making them numb and heavy. It wasn't the first time for him to wake up like this, hurt and confused, and the blindness only added to his distress. Loki wanted to lift a hand to subtly feel his surroundings, but was stopped by a wire of some sorts attached to his forearm. Alarmed by the intrusion, he quickly sat up in the bed that someone put him into (he had no recollection of it taking place) and yanked the thing from his arm.

'*Sir, please, calm down.*' A detached voice sounded all around him.

'Jarvis? What are those things attached to me?' The god managed to somewhat calm his racing heart. If Jarvis was present, it meant that he was still in the tower and not some S.H.I.E.L.D. facility.

'*It's an IV sir. It lets us provide your body with pain medications and nourishments.*' the AI answered calmly, making Loki relax further.

'Where am I? What happened? Where is Stark?' The immortal asked, fumbling with the IV, unsettled by the feeling of intrusion it left.

'We're in med bay,' another voice answered. Doctor Banner, Loki recalled. His brain felt like cotton, and he had trouble focusing his thoughts for more than a few seconds. 'Healing rooms? You were injured, do you remember that?'

He heavily sunk back onto the pillow, mind abuzz with hazy memories and sensations. Pain was the most prominent, and relief?... when strong arms encircled him and Stark's voice rang in his ears.

He shifted on the bed.

'I got attacked by the Hawk.' It finally came to him.

'Yeah, Tony brought you here so that I could treat the wound, but your body started to aggressively heal itself. The magic, disrupted by the sigils got twisted I think, and caused more harm than good.' The doctor explained.

Loki nodded. It made sense. Healing arts weren't as innocent as one might think, so the sigils reacted violently to the magic flowing in his veins trying to knit the wound, and therefore bringing him more suffering.

'You are probably correct.'

'How do you feel now?' Bruce asked. Loki was surprised to hear genuine concern in his voice.

'I can still feel it, the pain, but it is only an echo of how it has been previously.' The god furrowed his brow. 'It should not be possible to heal this fast without my *Seiðr*...'

'Yeah, you are right. We kept you in pharmacological coma for three days, because even with the tattoos, your magic tried to heal you.' Bruce sat down near the bed. 'Tony... talked to Clint... after. He will not attack you again. Nor will Natasha.' Loki sensed that the human wasn't finished, so he waited silently for the doctor to gather his thoughts and continue. 'It... may not be my place to say it, but Tony really cares about you...'

'And he should not, because I am a monster?' Loki growled. A sudden anger flared in his veins.

'No, no. It's not what I wanted to say. It's just that... he doesn't often display such clear signs of affection and well uh... I was wondering how do you feel about him.' The mortal finished awkwardly.

Loki opened his mouth to answer, but nothing came out. It was true, he enjoyed Stark's company, much more than anyone's else in a long time. Did he harbor feelings for the brilliant inventor? He was reluctant to admit that, yes he did, even to himself. It felt like a weakness, he couldn't afford to have.

In the end Loki only managed to say:

'I do not know. I cherish his company and his brilliant mind. He is such a refreshing sight among all the dull masses of Midgard. He is... different. He does not condemn me just because I am who I am. And he is not afraid of the monster I carry inside.'

'Yeah.' Bruce sighed. 'I know what you mean.'



They were both lost in thoughts for some time, and the silence stretched. Then the doctor stood up and asked.

'Do you want me to put you under again? It will take some more time for your leg to heal entirely. You don't have to be conscious for that.' Sensing the god's hesitation the scientist clarified. 'Only Tony and I can enter this room, no one will disturb your sleep.'

Loki closed his eyes tiredly and nodded. Norns only knew, the pain his tainted *Seiðr* caused was really unsettling.

Bruce shuffled closer and 'Sleep well,' was the last thing Loki heard before the dreamless void embraced his mind again.

~

The next time Loki woke up, he wasn't alone in the room. A familiar kind of energy hummed just to the left of the bed. His outstretched hand met an unruly mop of hair resting on the covers close to his side.

'How long has he been asleep?' Loki whispered, confident that Jarvis would register his voice nonetheless.

'98 minutes sir.' The AI answered almost as silently.

'And for how long has he been awake before that?'

'Approximately 47 hours.'

'Then we shall let him sleep for a while longer.' The god decided. He then gently slid his fingers between the brown locks and lightly caressed the inventor's scalp. Tony murmured something incoherently, but didn't wake up. A small smile graced Loki's lips. He really was fond of the mortal man and immensely enjoyed his company. It was strange, this fluttering feeling in his chest, a spark of warmth whenever he thought about Stark. The almost two weeks of solitude only confirmed his suspicion that this was something more than a fleeting fascination. He wanted to spend more time with the brilliant engineer, moreover he wanted to truly see him.

Loki delicately brushed his fingertips over the exposed skin on Stark's neck, reveling in the warmth it brought to his always cool digits.

It was dangerous, he thought with a frown, to have this kind of a weak point. The god had lots of enemies, eager to exploit every opportunity to bring him harm. It was a wonder that through all his time here on Midgard he was attacked only once.

He would put a stigma on Stark, a target mark: *shoot here to wound the God of Lies*.

On the other hand, as long as his sight remained impaired he could barely defend himself. It was his best option to remain here, in the tower, surrounded by Earth's Mightiest Heroes and Tony Stark himself. And maybe pursue this foolish fantasy, if only for a while.

With those thoughts running through his head, and fingers still splayed on the mortal's warm skin, Loki drifted off to sleep.

~

'Okay, you recording Jarvis?'

'Yes sir.'

'Good, good. So, maybe something like this: *your fingers are nimble, your mind is too, maybe a new puzzle, can I interest you?* God, that was awful. Scrap it J.' Tony whined.

'As you wish sir. May I remind you that you recorded thirty four new messages in the last two hours. At this rate, before mister Laufeyson wakes up, you'll use all the cube's available memory space.'

'Oh, well. I have nothing else to do except staring at our residing Sleeping Beauty, oh wait, that title is reserved for Steve. Snow White then. Maybe I'll tell Dummy to bring me some of my tools here. You know, just to busy myself with something. Or maybe I should refit that god damn glove? I swear, it pinches in every joint. I...'

'Sir.'

'I'm telling you Jarvis. My hands aren't that friggin big. Why is that even an iss...'

'Sir.' the AI repeated more urgently. '*Mister Laufeyson is stirring.*'

Tony's head whipped to look at the god. Loki slowly opened his eyes, sighed and closed them again.

'Oh! You're awake! How do you feel?' the inventor asked leaving the cube to sit closer to the bed.

'Weak,' Loki rasped after a prolonged silence.

'Well, you've been under for over five days, it's understandable.' Tony stood up and filled a glass with water from the pitcher left by Bruce, some hours ago. 'Give me your hand.'

The immortal didn't move. He didn't as much as acknowledge Tony's request. He just lay there, under pristine white covers, with his eyes closed, looking like a corpse. The billionaire's heart clenched. What if he'd come too late and Clint... And Loki would be **dead**... Tony shook his head, the god wasn't that easy to kill, but the engineer's brain as always supplied an array of gory scenarios. He scolded himself mentally. Now was not the time for such grim thoughts, he had reparations to make.

'Listen,' he started reluctantly, sitting on the edge of the bed, glass still in hand. 'I wanted to apologize for leaving you alone like that, it was a dick move.' He took Loki's hand and wrapped his lithe fingers around the cool glass. The god slowly turned towards him, opening his eyes as if waking from a dream.

'Why? What did I do?' he asked.

Stark grimaced. *Definitely a dick move.* Loki looked like a kicked puppy that had been left alone, tied to a tree in the woods. The inventor didn't really think about how his stupid behavior would affect the god and seeing him like that, made Tony feel like a total jerk.

Loki's hand was still clutched in his, as the god didn't make any move to drink the offered water. Tony absentmindedly rubbed small circles with his thumb over the Trickster's porcelain skin.

'I don't know, that's the problem. And instead of avoiding the issue I should have just asked you. So here goes: are you draining my arc reactor's power with your voodoo?'

Loki's head jerked up in a sudden motion.

'I do no such thing, I swear.'

'Yeah, the thing is, around you the reactor's power usage grows significantly, so I thought...' the inventor faltered.

'That I was stealing it from you?' The god deadpanned.

'Yeah, sorry.'

Loki finally took a sip from his glass, leaving Tony's hands empty. The human's gaze traveled over his face, pale column of a throat and took in all the small details of exhaustion marring the bedridden Trickster's visage. Tony decided then that he believed the god's words. Maybe he was naive, and it wouldn't be the first time he put his trust in someone who then later betrayed him, but a gut feeling told him he wasn't wrong.

'Leave,' the god's voice brought him back from his musings.

'What?' Tony asked confused.

'If my presence endangers your life then you should leave me be. Construct an impervious cage somewhere in the bellows of this tower, from where my person cannot bring you harm.'

The glass in Loki's limp fingers was tipping dangerously so the inventor took it away, accidentally brushing his hand against the god's. The immortal jerked from the touch and hissed.

'Stark!'

'Yeah, no. Not gonna happen Bambi. You see, I've made the mistake of leaving you alone once, and look what happened. I'm not taking my eyes off you again.'

Tony took both of Loki's hands into his. The contrast between them was really prominent, his sun-kissed, worn by constant work fingers encasing the god's moon-pale and cool ones. He stared for a moment, enthralled by the sight, leisurely rubbing some warmth into the immortal's digits, lost in the moment of closeness. Loki sat still, buried in covers, breathing evenly, as if waiting to observe how the situation would develop. Inspired by a sudden thought Tony lifted their entwined hands and planted a light kiss on the god's knuckles. The Trickster's breath hitched and he untangled his hand to brush the billionaire's cheek. He leaned in slowly, as if to give the human time to change his mind, and then kissed him sweetly. Tony's heart stopped for a second when their lips met; suddenly overwhelmed by feelings he had trouble describing. His mind went blank, all thoughts instantly evaporating, pushed out by a single word: *more!* Stark, never the one to deny himself anything, licked at the seam of Loki's lips, for the god to grant him permission to deepen the kiss. And as the Trickster did, Tony slipped his hand in Loki's black locks, and delved into a pleasure, he never knew he craved so much.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 13

They savored the kiss for as long as Tony could hold his breath. When they finally parted, the inventor couldn't help, but giggle.

'Now I know why in the myths they called you Silver-tongue,' he panted breathlessly.

Loki just smirked, amused.

'Oh, I must be out of practice, if you are still talking so much,' he teased.

Tony grunted in surprise when he was suddenly yanked forward by the collar of his shirt and landed on top of the Trickster.

'I think, I need to amend that,' Loki whispered, the playful smirk still plastered to his lips, but the engineer was never the one to surrender without a fight. He bit on the god's swollen lower lip and sucked lightly, eliciting a small gasp from the deity.

'Oh yeah? Maybe I'll be the one to leave you breathless,' Tony purred and licked at the god's lips again. He encircled both of Loki's wrists with his fingers and pinned them to the pillow on either side of his head. The Trickster momentarily stilled under him, all playfulness washing away from his face like a wave retreating with the tide. Tony caught on to the change in a second and lifted his head to look at the immortal whose eyes were shut tightly.

'What's wrong?' Tony asked, confused by the sudden change.

'I do not take kindly to being restrained,' the god confessed through gritted teeth.

Stark looked at his hands pinning the other's wrists and then it clicked, the echo of Loki's words sharp in his mind: *Eventually I was unable to move, let alone defend myself any longer and only then the All-Father saw fit to grace us with his divine presence and put those loathsome sigils upon my flesh.*

Those bastards must have roughed him really badly if the memory still haunted him. After realizing that Tony instantly let go, but something in the corner of his eye caught his attention.

'What the...,' he eyed the god's left hand and lifted it from the pillow. 'Just bear with me for a second,' Stark said as he exposed the immortal's forearm to examine it. The sigils acted strangely, well more strangely than usual anyway. Normally they moved lazily under the ivory skin without an actual pattern, as far as he knew, but now they followed his finger, when he ran it over the pale flesh.

'What is it?' Loki asked, confused by the mortal's strange behavior.

Tony splayed his palm on Loki's cool arm and observed as the black tendrils hurried to it. After a moment his skin started tingling and he lifted his hand away.

'Huh... Jarvis what's the energy loss now?'

*'3,2% sir and rising slowly.'*

'What are you doing?' Loki asked impatiently shifting under the mortal man.

'An experiment. Can you feel those sigils move?'

'Yes,' the god hissed, 'every movement as they devour my *Seiðr*.'

'And do you feel what they are doing now?'

Once again Tony traced his finger over the deity's cool skin, watching as the black swirls followed. Loki furrowed his brow and concentrated on that feeling. After a second, he inhaled sharply and yanked his arm from Tony's.

'Those loathsome markings crave not only my power, but yours too!' He growled trying to move away from the human, and not succeeding, thanks to the limited space on the bed.

'But why? It's not like the arc reactor is some magical artifact. It's pure science!'

'How did you come by having it embodied into your chest?' Loki asked curious. He wanted to touch it, this glowing orb, it was so powerful that he could feel its bright presence without actually seeing it. Yet he didn't dare, knowing now that the sigils would instantaneously latch onto the brilliance and feed on it.

'Uh, it's a long story and I'm half hanging from this damn bed. Maybe we should relocate and get something to eat first?' Tony stood up and carefully removed the IV from Loki's arm.

'Can you walk?'

~

They ended up in Tony's lounge, Loki sprawled on the sofa with his legs on the inventor's lap. The comfortable silence stretched as Stark gathered his thoughts and courage to once again relive the horrors of Afghanistan. The god probably knew some of the facts from Barton, but Tony wanted to explain certain parts himself. After so many years, it still wasn't easy for him to really talk about this. Even Pepper didn't know everything, he wanted to spare her the most gruesome details.

Finally he took a deep breath and said:

'They used to call me the Merchant of Death...'

Once he started talking he just wanted to get it all out. The words flew from his mouth undisturbed. Loki listened intently, drawing random patterns on the mortal's thigh.

He told him everything. That he was a stupid, ignorant jerk, only worrying about his own comfort and new, shiny weapons he created. How he got abducted by the Ten Rings, and what they demanded from him. Loki's fingers stilled at the mention of torture and he took Tony's hand in his own and pressed a soft kiss to his knuckles, just like the billionaire did earlier. Stark smiled at that and started playing with the Trickster's long hair. He then continued his story, explaining how Yinsen saved Tony's life and sacrificed his own. Then he quickly recounted his antics that led to



the discovery of Obadiah's betrayal and defeat. After that he skimmed over the topic of his father, not wanting to go into details there, and how his creation that was supposed to keep him alive, slowly poisoned him. What a close call it was, him being able to render the new element thanks to his father's study of the Tesseract.

'The Cosmic Cube? Your father possessed it?' Loki asked.

'Yeah, I used his notes and a secret message he left for me to decipher and created this baby,' Tony tapped on the arc's casing.

The immortal looked thoughtful for a moment, idly drumming his fingertips on the engineer's thigh again.

'Yes, now that you mentioned it, it is indeed similar,' the god mused.

'Hm?'

'The energy of your arc reactor resembles the Tesseract's. Perhaps this is the cause why Odin's sigils try to tap into that power.'

'Your magic is like the Tesseract?' Tony asked confused a little.

'Not precisely; it has been tainted by it and the residue is still there. The markings were attuned precisely to my *Seiðr* after I have been dragged away from Midgard. I did not have time or opportunity to expel the foreign power from within my veins, and so it was assumed that it was also mine.' The immortal worried his lower lip. 'It is troubling...'

'How so?' Tony bent down and traced a finger over the reddened flesh.

'I do not wish to endanger you further, by being in your presence, knowing to what it may lead, yet I do not wish to be left alone again.' The last words were whispered, as if the god was ashamed admitting to such weakness. Tony's heart melted at that, and he wanted to jump the god and kiss him silly, but he had to clarify some things first.

'You know, the energy loss isn't that big. And we have Jarvis to monitor it further. There's really not much risk here. But!' Tony made a dramatic pause. 'I think, to be entirely sure, we need to field test it.'

The inventor wriggled his way between the god and the backrest of the sofa and pressed himself against the deity, bestowing a hungry kiss upon his lips. Loki only chuckled lightly and responded eagerly to the mortal's advances.

~

*'Miss Pots if I may...?'*

'What is it Jarvis?' Pepper asked perplexed. Was it only her imagination, or did Jarvis sound hesitant?

*'I know it's unorthodox for me to ask this of you, but would you be so kind and took off your stilettos?'*

'Why?' She asked uncertainty, but did as the AI asked. It must have been important, otherwise he wouldn't bring it up.

*'You'll understand when you enter the lounge.'*

She did just that and the sight that greeted her was so out of place that it rendered her speechless. She stood in the doorway and marveled over the scene she was witnessing.

There lay Tony on the couch and Loki on top of him, his head on the inventor's shoulder. The god appeared to be sleeping. And Tony... Tony was stroking his hair gently. He seemed to murmur something. It took Pepper a moment to realize that he was actually humming a song, but she wasn't sure which one, she could barely hear it.

And the most unexpected part of this whole picture was Tony's expression.

Pepper was his assistant and friend for many years, but it was the first time she ever saw such tenderness in his gaze. Even when they were together, he never quite looked at her like that as far as she was aware. She felt a stab of jealousy in her heart, but it quickly died away. Tony seemed really concerned by the god's wellbeing and she had to assume they resolved the issue that made the engineer so restless last time. The redhead wasn't sure yet if they were good for each other, but this weird thing they had made Tony happy and she hoped that it would work out for them.

Pepper waved at her friend to silently get his attention. He did notice her, but didn't stop combing through the god's black tresses. His lips stretched into a grin and he propped himself a little bit more comfortably on the couch. The CEO gestured with her head towards the stack of documents she had in her hand and made a signing motion over it. The engineer just nodded and mouthed an okay. Pepper placed the stack of papers on the flower stand and turned to leave, not wanting to disturb the pair any longer. While in the corridor and out of earshot she spoke.

'Thanks Jarvis, and please remind him later that I need those signed on Friday.'

*'Yes Miss Pots.'*

~

Clint sat at the kitchen table, a steaming mug of coffee between his hands. He just came back from a routine patrol. They sometimes had to do those - a service to the community, according to Cap.

He was cold and tired, and his chin still ached where Tony punched him.

The whole ordeal with Loki got out of hand pretty quickly, the archer mused warming his hands against the cup. He just wanted to teach the god a lesson, show him that he wasn't afraid or otherwise intimidated by the deity. He never thought it would escalate to THAT. Last time he shot an arrow at Loki the god barely even noticed! And now he got an earful from Stark on what a huge dick and a total moron he was.

At first he didn't understand what the fuss was all about. It took Tony two punches in the face and one in the gut that he served Hawkeye to finally calm down enough to explain. Apparently the god got cursed by his super dad and now his magic worked against him or something, if the archer understood properly, and the wound almost managed to kill him.

Well wasn't that just fucked up? How was he supposed to know. He just saw the fucker who brainwashed him and he took his chance.

Clint slurped his coffee cautiously. Well maybe the deranged God of Mischief sported some new scars, but he was a god for fuck's sake! An arrow to the knee should be nothing to him.

Thanks to all that Clint was now the enemy number one in the tower. Stark ostentatiously avoided

him, Bruce glared at him once with disappointment, but said nothing, and Cap lectured him for half an hour about basic human rights. Well shit, Loki isn't human, is he now?

A knock on the kitchen doorframe captured his attention and Clint froze glancing at the intruder.

*Oh boy, he was dead meat.*

Thor strolled nonchalantly through the vast space separating them and sat at the table opposite the archer.

'In my defense...' Barton started, but the god shushed him with a wave of his big palm. Oh god, his hands were really massive.

'You do not have to say anything. Loki told me the whole tale.' The Thunderer started, making Clint grimace, *well goodbye cruel world*. 'I understand that you sought retribution for the transgressions my brother committed against you, and you certainly had the right to, although it was not an honorable act. On Asgard disputes like that are usually resolved through a duel, but you midgardians are a strange lot.' Thor shook his head exasperated.

'Sooo you are not mad? We're good?' Clint asked not believing his luck.

'Do not be mistaken little hawk. I said I understand your actions, but I do not approve of them. And if this happens again, if Loki suffers because of you, or your S.H.I.E.L.D. I will not tolerate it, do I make myself clear?' Thor glared his way and stood up.

'Yeah...' Hawkeye squeaked.

'Good!' The god beamed and smacked him on the shoulder before leaving.

Clint sat there paralyzed for a good twenty minutes.

~

The next few days they spend almost entirely in the workshop, working on a way to contain Loki's markings to his body only. Yet they made little progress. The sigils stubbornly refused to cooperate, still clinging to Tony's skin every time he made a direct contact with the god. The inventor wasn't really that concerned, but he tried nevertheless to give the god some peace of mind, and because he wanted to touch his Trickster more, but couldn't, Loki stubbornly moved away every time he stayed in a close proximity for too long. It was infuriating to say the least, especially when Tony's inner sex demon screamed for attention, and the god before him was an epitome of attractiveness. He wanted to devour him, strip him bare and take hard on the nearest worktable. Listen to the god's hoarse voice screaming his name while bringing him to completion. Or to love him slowly, tenderly, against the same window he was once thrown from. So many possibilities, yet Loki would not have it, until he was certain he would not endanger the billionaire's life. That made Tony want to howl to the moon.

And to add insult to the injury, the situation in the tower wasn't exactly peachy. He avoided the others as much as he could, especially the assassin's duo. He had some harsh words with Clint after the incident, punches were thrown, threats too, and he just kind of wasn't in the mood to deal with that right now.

He was tinkering with a stubborn wire in his armor that tended to stick out between the plates and short-circuit the whole frame, when Jarvis announced:

'Sir, Doctor Banner is here for you.'

'Let him in.'

The scientist approached, curiously looking around.

'Can I talk to you for a moment? Alone.' Bruce glanced towards the god sprawled over the sofa, his Rubik's cube clicking quietly.

'You would have to change floors if you wish not to be overheard by me doctor.' Loki smirked at them.

Banner looked towards Tony and when the later only shrugged he continued.

'Okay then. We are worried about you. You haven't left the workshop for days and you locked everyone out of the penthouse. If not for Jarvis we wouldn't even know if you were still alive. You could come out a little more often.' Bruce looked at him with sad eyes and Tony felt a bit guilty for causing him to worry. But the anger was still stronger.

'No thanks, I like it here. It doesn't feel like I'm the enemy (and wasn't that a fucking irony?). You think I didn't notice those glares and hushed conversations? No, I invited you all here and now I feel alienated in my own house. I'd rather stay where I feel welcomed.' Tony gestured to his worktable where some disassembled cluster of metal and cables lay.

'Maybe you should both come out then? For how long do intend to vegetate here? It's not healthy.'

'Look Bruce... On the other hand, you're right. Fuck it! I have an idea. Jarvis place in an order for me.'

*'Whatever you wish sir.'* the AI responded immediately.

'I need a suit for Loki, for tonight.'

'What?' Bruce asked confused.

'What are you planning?' The god chuckled, sitting straight.

'I'm gonna take you out for a dinner. It's a date!' Tony grinned wolfishly.

'Will that not cause a panic amongst your people?' Loki curiously inclined his head. That idea was appealing, he was getting quite bored, confined to the same places all the time.

'Tony, I don't think it's a good idea.' Bruce warned, but the mischievous glint in the inventor's eye told him that it was a lost battle.

'Nah, you weren't mentioned by name, and your photos were all erased by S.H.I.E.L.D., something to do with now wanting to make Thor look suspicious. And sure it is. All my ideas are brilliant. Now, Jarvis I want a catalogue of the best suits, stat.'

~

'Okay, but dirty gold or green?'

'You decide.'

'Jarvis help me here buddy, the god is uncooperative.'

*'I was not designed to give clothing advices, sir.'*

'Oh come on!' Tony whined. 'Where is Pepper, when you need her?'

*'Miss Potts is on a meeting with our British partners sir.'* the AI informed.

'Call her, we need help.' The inventor decided throwing both ties on the coffee table. Loki's new three piece suit came in a half an hour ago. It was of a classic cut, but very well fitted to the god's lean body, hugging it deliciously in all the right places. To it there was also a black dress shirt and two ties, as specified by Stark himself. And they both looked damn good on his... lover? Tony still had trouble wrapping his head around this idea, but he liked the sound of it.

The conference call connected and Pepper's annoyed face was displayed on Tony's main monitor.

'I am in the middle of an important meeting that could bring millions of dollars and hundreds of new workplaces to your company Tony, this better be good.' The redhead warned with a stern voice.

'Pep it's a life or death situation! Which is better, green or gold?' The genius lifted both of the ties to Loki's throat to present them to his CEO.

Pepper looked surprised for a moment.

'What are you doing?' She asked perplexed.

'We're going on a date, and he won't help me choose!' The billionaire complained, scowling at the god.

'How can I if I do not see them?' Loki asked unperturbed.

'See what I have to deal with?'

Pepper sighed exasperated.

'I would go with the gold. It warms the overall look.' She said looking fondly at the odd pair, bickering almost like an old married couple. It was amazing how fast they clicked together and how compatible they were. Great minds think alike, Pepper mused shaking her head at this ridiculous situation.

'Can you handle the reservation on your own, or do you want me to take care of that too?'

'Jarvis got that covered, thanks. And thank you, have fun!' Tony waved at her, as Loki inclined his head in gratitude.

'You too,' she chuckled terminating the connection.

~

They arrived at the restaurant fashionably late in one of Tony's very expensive and custom made cars. The billionaire had arranged for a private room so they would not be disturbed. He just wanted to spend a pleasant evening with the god, eating delicious food and talking about lots of different things.

Talking was always the most tedious part of his dates, because there seldom was a topic interesting enough he could share with the other person. But that wasn't the case with Loki. The Trickster was insanely intelligent and even if he wasn't familiar with Earth's science, he learned super-fast. Tony was in love with the god's brain, so similar to his own.



Before they even noticed, three hours went by, the inventor teaching Loki how to open clams and snails, just to see the god's expression when he tasted those. He ordered many dishes, so the immortal could try different flavors and decide for himself what he liked most. As it occurred, he was a big fan of fish and seafood in general. They were just discussing parallel universes and the butterfly effect when the dessert arrived. Tony wasn't sure if Loki would like his choice, but he really hoped that he did.

A big goblet of various flavored ice cream was brought by their waiter. The engineer motioned for it to be left at the center of the table, so they both could easily reach for it with the long spoons.

'I thought this is something you might enjoy.' Tony said after the waiter left them alone again.

Loki lifted his brow curiously as he scooped some on his spoon and plugged it into his mouth. Stark watched as the Trickster's expression morphed from cautious interest to bliss, and giggled when the god moaned quietly.

'This is ice?' Loki asked with disbelief.

'Ice cream, or frozen cream to be precise. It comes in vast variety of flavors. You like it?'

'It's delicious.'

'Good because I have ideas where we could use it.' The inventor said seductively.

'Oh, do tell.'

'Well, we could always do this.'

Tony took hold of Loki's hand and with his index and middle fingers scooped some of the ice cream to then lick it clean very thoroughly. Loki moaned again feeling the inventor's skilled tongue darting between his soiled digits.

'Yes, the idea does appeal to me,' he purred encouraging Tony to try again. Stark smiled lasciviously, took another portion, licked it quickly, and kissed Loki passionately, plucking his tongue into the god's mouth, tastings distinctively of chocolate and vanilla. They both moaned this time, quickly forgetting about the dessert, as they battled for dominance with their tongues and teeth, the kiss getting messier and messier with each passing second.

'I think we should change locations,' Tony chuckled when they finally separated for a much needed breath.

'Yes,' Loki agreed, smoothly standing up. Tony noticed that his dress pants were nicely tented at the front. Well, he wasn't especially surprised, sporting an erection himself. They quickly paid for dinner and without further delay exited the restaurant, only to be instantly assaulted by camera flashes going out all around them. Tony cursed viciously, momentarily blinded as he searched for Loki's hand to haul him closed to himself. They were attacked by overenthusiastic paparazzi stepping in their way, shouting questions at Tony about his mysterious date. The billionaire ignored them all and generously using his elbows managed to finally free them from the small crowd. They hastily reached the car, and the engineer helped Loki get inside. With the god safely separated from the hyenas he abruptly stopped and acidly glared their way. A cacophony of *Mister Stark's* almost deafened him as he only managed to growl 'It's none of your damn business!' before stepping around the car and slamming the doors shut after himself.

'Fucking vultures!' he cursed igniting the engine and speeding away, the mood irreparably ruined.

## Chapter 14

'Sir?'

Tony woke up with a groan. The tinted windows slowly regained their transparency as Jarvis projected latest news and weather forecast on the crystalline surface. A lot of headlines were about him and his mystery date, but none showed Loki's face. When they came back home yesterday, Tony made sure to sic Jarvis on all those damn paparazzi, hack them or their publisher, and distort his companion's visage, just to piss them all off. Modern technology... So easy to temper with.

He saved the articles to a new folder to go through them later, just to laugh at the theories the reporters spouted and buried his face back between warm pillows. Yet Jarvis' urgent voice managed to chase the sleepiness away.

*'Sir, Director Fury and a dozen of agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. is attempting to infiltrate the tower.'* the AI said, projecting a series of blueprints with thirteen dots flashing red on them, each supplied with a file containing information about a specific agent.

Tony fell from the bed, growling profanities left and right.

He didn't anticipate for Fury to be onto them this fast, or ever, but the pirate was here now, trying and failing to access Jarvis' protocols and let himself in into Tony's home. If he wanted to scold him, he could have rang instead off waking him up at 5 in the morning... And then it dawned on him. They came here for Loki, to lock him away somewhere deep underground and prod and poke at the vulnerable god. Jesus! He was such a moron, for even thinking that no one would notice! S.H.I.E.L.D. wasn't supposed to be monitoring for Loki anymore with him safely tucked in Asgard, but apparently they still did and now it was on Tony that they found him!

'Over my dead body,' Stark growled almost ripping away the sheets still tangled around his legs. 'Jarvis initiate protocol 6497324 alpha. No one enters or leaves without my permission.'

*'Initiating protocol 6497324 alpha. The Avengers Tower is on lockdown sir.'* the AI confirmed. *'Captain Rogers is on the line.'*

'Gimme.' Tony sighed, carding a hand through his unruly hair. Without bothering to dress properly, he padded barefoot, only in boxers straight to the god's bedroom.

'Tony? What is happening? Is this some kind of a drill?' Steve asked in his Captain America voice.

'Nope, Fury is huffing and puffing at our doors, but this shack ain't made of straw. He won't get in.'

'Is this about Loki? Why now? Did one of..'

'No,' the engineer interrupted, 'I was a stupid and shortsighted fuck. We went out to dinner last night and they took a picture of us. S.H.I.E.L.D. must have sniffed it out, damn it. I'm gonna wake Loki, alert Thor and Bruce for me okay?'

'What do you want us to do?' A few bangs and rustles of fabric were heard over the speakers as Cap hastily dressed himself, and Tony couldn't help but imagine him in star spangled briefs hoping on one foot to get his pants on, but the smile quickly vanished from his lips. Dealing with Fury wasn't just a walk in the park. He hoped, he wouldn't have to use the heavy guns.

'Tony?' Steve prompted.

'Nothing, for now. I want to handle it personally. Just send Thor and Bruce here to stay with Loki.'

'As you wish.' The line clicked when Jarvis disconnected the call and the billionaire gently knocked at the Trickster's bedroom door.

'Snowflake, you up?' Stark cautiously poked his head inside. He spotted the god, sprawled on the bed under a thin sheet, every curve deliciously accented by the soft fabric. Tony stepped closer, hungrily committing the sight to memory.

'Loki?' he called again.

The god of sexiness stirred and slowly opened his eyes.

'Hey there babe.' Tony sat at the edge of the king-size bed and bend down to properly wake up his lover. Loki hummed happily into the kiss and snaked his hands around the inventor's torso, lifting an eyebrow at his lack of clothes. Without obstruction the lithe fingers ventured lower, memorizing every firm muscle, to finally settle on the band of Tony's boxers.

'Good morning to you too,' the god whispered against Tony's moist lips. 'To what do I owe the pleasure of being woken in this fashion?'

'To Fury actually. I know, it's a boner-killer, the image's so disturbing.' The inventor sighed dramatically.

'What?!' Loki accidentally bumped his forehead against Tony's, hard.

'Ow! Jesus, is your head made of steel? Don't worry sweet-cheeks, I'm going to talk to him in a moment, but we'll wait for your cavalry to arrive first.' Just as he said that, the elevator pinged and admitted two Avengers onto their floor.

'I am not going to stay behind and cover in fear of your Director.' Loki stated while lightly shoving the inventor away as he untangled himself from the sheets. Tony could admire the god in full glory, his mouth watering at the sight of his pale, well-toned body unashamedly displayed for all to see. The inventor swallowed audibly, momentarily mesmerized and stared longingly, until Thor's loud voice disturbed his fantasies and chased them away.

'Brother!'

Meanwhile Loki managed to find his robe and gingerly shrugged it on.

'In here,' the younger god shouted back, and a moment later the Thunderer, shadowed by Bruce, entered the bedroom.

'But Loki...' Tony started, worry drilling holes in his stomach. He only acted nonchalant, as always

when faced with danger, but deep inside he feared for the god. What if Fury had some fucking trick hidden in his sleeve? What if he'll manage to take Loki away from him? What he would do then? Go to war with S.H.I.E.L.D.? If it would only affect him, he would, but what about Pepper and a ton of other people Stark Industries employed, they would be collateral he's not sure he's the right to sacrifice.

And they only just got together. There was do much more to discover in this relationship, and mind you Tony Stark didn't do relationships, but he was willing to try if it meant to be with this brilliant deity, his mad god. He was not ready to let him go, they just started! Looking at him now, face marred by scars, an angry frown upon his brow, Loki was the most brilliant puzzle Tony had had the pleasure of encountering. Without hesitation he caught the god, his god, by the neck and captured his pouting lips in a hungry and possessive kiss. Somewhere in the background Thor snorted as Loki fought back over dominance with the mad inventor. When they finally parted, both flushed and breathless, Tony pressed his still slightly aching forehead to the Trickster's brow.

'Okay, let's go.'

~

Jarvis was instructed to only let Fury in, his goons be damned. After some cursing (Fury) and calm explanations (Jarvis) the Director has been led to the lounge on the common floor. He assumed a strategic position at the big window and busied himself with intensely studying the pedestrians one could barely see from such a height. After a moment Tony and Loki sauntered in and sat at the grand sofa, followed by the rest of the Avengers. Yet the superspy didn't acknowledge their arrival, only continued to stare out, his one good eye trailing some unsuspecting citizen's path. It was a power play and they knew it. So Tony sat more comfortably, Loki to his left and Cap hovering over his right shoulder, and waited for the pirate's move. And while the silence stretched to almost uncomfortable levels, the engineer noticed that he and Loki were being keenly observed by Natasha, her gaze unblinking as if she was an android. So he flashed her his most unnerving Cheshire cat smile and deliberately stroked the god's palm. Loki only half smirked in return.

The God of Lies looked really calm, almost bored, but Tony, being so close to him lately, learned to spot some tells regarding the immortal's state of mind. He was wary of the Director, and with good reason. The subtle wave of coldness traversing the room at regular intervals as the Trickster feigned boredom, told Tony that the god's exterior calmness was only a facade.

After a few more minutes of silence Tony sighed dramatically, took out his phone and started playing some silly game, increasing the volume of its annoying sounds as much as he could. Fury whirled around, coat flapping ominously, and stared down at the inventor angrily.

'You think it's a game?' the Director growled.

'Oh yeah. It's called Birds something and it's actually quite amusing.' Tony babbled, not even taking his eyes of the screen to look at the leather-clad spy.

'Stark!'

'What? You are the one insisting on wasting my time with all your power plays. I have better things to do than sit here and admire your questionable choice of wardrobe.'

'You want to do it quickly? Fine.' The Director almost spat at him. 'I'm considering issuing a court order to detain you under charges of treason and aiding a known war criminal. Was that quick enough? You still with me?'

'What war criminal?' Stark asked glancing around with mock-surprise, as if looking for someone.

'Excuse me?'

'There is no war criminal here. You ceded all your rights to persecute Loki when Thor took him back to Asgard. And I know from the source,' the engineer motioned towards the Thunder God, who was shooting angry glares at Fury, 'that he underwent his punishment. You can even see the results.'

'What is he doing here then?'

'Seeking refuge,' Tony shot right away, 'he's a *persona non grata* in the golden fairy land. They don't want him there.'

'Earth doesn't want him either.' The superspy scrutinized the god in question and smiled wickedly. 'He has to leave our soil.'

'You want Thor to establish an embassy here? Stark Industries can provide the bureau space.'

'You just said he's not welcomed in Asgard. They wouldn't grant him immunity.' Tony wanted to wipe the triumphant smirk from Fury's face with his fist, but after a short internal battle refrained. For now.

'In this regard it might be of importance that I am an heir to the throne of Jotunheim and therefore entitled to undergo negotiations with other realms and thus I have as you call it... diplomatic immunity?' Loki's calm voice joined in the discussion.

The stupid smirk washed from Fury's face in record time, and Tony had a sudden urge to kiss the god.

'Is this true?' The superspy whipped his head around to stare at Thor.

'It is indeed. Loki has been adopted into our family centuries ago, but his real father was the king of the Jotnar.' The blonde confirmed.

'Was?'

'Lauvey has been... assassinated a few years back.' Loki clarified.

'So you haven't been crowned, or whatever aliens do to acknowledge their leaders?' Fury was plotting again, trying to find some technicality to stab his claws into.

'No. I am however the eldest son and the throne is rightfully mine. I assume one of my younger siblings is currently filling the spot, but it is of no importance, I am royalty still.'

'You have more brothers?' Tony asked curiously, ignoring their unwanted guest for the moment.

'Yes, two as a matter of fact. Yet I never truly met them.'

'Enough with the chitchat Stark. I will leave you and your protégé for now, but he has to be put under surveillance 24/7 and I want weekly reports of his actions,' Fury addressed Natasha, 'one step...'

'No.' Tony interjected not even listening, he was flipping through his phone again.

'You have no say...'



'No, **you** have no say in any of this Nick. Loki is neither an animal nor a property. He has been tortured over a long period of time and it should be enough of a punishment. I don't care what you think or want,' Tony looked straight into Fury's eye. The inventor's lips were stretched into a wide, friendly grin, but his gaze remained cold as Jotunheim's frozen plains. 'He is under my protection, and if you'll even try to lay one finger on him I will personally hack all your databases and release all of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s dirt into the internet. You know I have the means to do so.' Tony pocketed his phone and stretched one arm over Loki's shoulder to place it on the backrest of the sofa. His gaze, traveling over Fury's fuming person, was steady and calculating. Stark knew of what he was capable of when threatened, and now the whole room, filled with superheroes, caught a glimpse of that steel, or rather iron resolve. They always took his flippant personality for granted, never suspecting there to be a darker side to the cheerful genius. And now, being confronted with that part of him, they suddenly realized how dangerous Stark could be if he wanted to. 'And don't even get me started about Pepper and her legal team. They would bury you under a mountain of law suits.' He gave the superspy a second to digest that, then stood up. 'I think we've reached an understanding here. You coming Lokes?' The god stood up gracefully and followed after the engineer without a word.

The elevator doors barely slid close after them when Tony was suddenly slammed hard against the wall. Loki devoured his mouth with a low growl humming in his throat while his skilled hands slid under the billionaire's t-shirt seeking warm skin. Stark tangled his fingers in the god's long hair and yanked, forcing the other to bend his head back, thus exposing the pale column of a throat. Once his lips descended on the perfect ivory flesh he immediately started sucking a mark right under the Trickster's Adam's apple. Loki gasped and shuddered, mouth agape as Tony bit his collarbone lightly to then lave at the teeth mark with his tongue, hot breath fanning over the god's flushed skin. They separated only for a moment so the immortal could tug Stark's shirt over his head and toss it away.

'You were magnificent.' Loki gasped against the inventor's ear, his hands once again mapping his lover's back.

'Yeah? You liked that?' Tony shuddered when Loki's tongue started doing wicked things to his earlobe. The god only purred, switching instead to suck a mark of his own on the inventor's warm skin.

The elevator pinged and opened, but the pair was too busy to notice, kissing and undressing simultaneously.

'Bedroom?' Stark panted. Suddenly he had difficulty forming words when Loki ground their hips together. They both moaned obscenely and as Tony regained back some brain functions he started guiding the god in the general direction of his bedroom.

'Jarvis, we're not in,' was the last thing he said before the doors slammed shut after them.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 15

They tumbled onto the bed in a frantic tangle of limbs, still lip-locked and kissing fiercely. For a while the only sound filling the room came from their racing hearts, sometimes punctuated by a soft sigh or a moan, which escaped one of them between light nips or long and filthy kisses.

It didn't take long though for Tony to lose all self-control and start whimpering openly when Loki, straddling him, started rolling his hips slowly, creating too little friction for the inventor's liking. Stark panted against the god's moist lips, so very alluring and kissable, relocated his hands from exploring the Trickster's well-toned back to squeeze his ass over the jeans the god wore.

'These have to go. I need to feel more of you.'

Loki reluctantly hoisted himself up, just barely enough for Tony to drag the offending denim down his thighs, and then bent down again nipping at his lover's collarbone while the inventor busied himself with stripping the damn tight and uncooperative fabric from his favorite god. Loki in turn left a wet trail of light kisses down Tony's chest (carefully avoiding the arc reactor) and abs, concentrating more on the V at the junction of hip and abdomen. The billionaire's breath hitched and pulse skyrocketed when the Trickster nuzzled his nose close to the growing bulge in Tony's pants.

'Loki...' he barely managed to suppress the full body shudder watching as Loki's teeth lightly scraped over the sensitive skin under his belly. 'Fuck!'

'Mmm soon,' the god promised hooking his fingers under the elastic band of Tony's boxers and tugging them down, exposing the mortal's erection. The human hissed as the cool morning air hit his heated skin and almost screamed when a second later Loki took the head of his cock into his mouth. The inventor arched up off the bed, seeking more of that blissful heat, but Loki wouldn't have that. He pinned the other's hips down with one hand and wrapped the second around the base of the engineer's cock, successfully preventing him from thrusting up again. Slowly the god started to bob his head up and down, tongue teasing the slit of Tony's dick, attentively listening to the delicious sounds the inventor unconsciously made every time he hummed around his erection.

At some point Tony slid his fingers into the god's long locks guiding him down and begging for more. The Trickster obliged smirking slightly and with one fell swoop took him to the hilt. When the head of Tony's cock hit the back of his throat he hummed around the hot flesh making Tony moan his name over and over again like a mantra. The god retreated slowly a moment later dragging his tongue over the underside of the billionaire's cock and repeated the whole process.

At this point Tony was reduced to begging and incoherent babbling, too far gone to construct proper sentences or even think. His mind was torn between *too much* and *not enough* and when Loki's sinful tongue finally brought him to completion the orgasm wrecking through his body was

one of the best he ever experienced and left him boneless and blissfully content.

Slowly regaining his breath Tony dragged Loki up against his chest and captured his reddened and swollen lips in a fierce kiss. He could taste his own come on the god's tongue, ravishing his mouth with abandon until he was forced to stop and breathe in some air. He kissed the corner of the Trickster's lips and as his right hand wandered over the pale plains of Loki's back and ass, his left firmly grabbed the god's unattended erection and started stroking. Slowly at first, spreading precome beading on the tip, then faster, sometimes twisting his wrist to add to the sensation, sometimes teasing the slit with his thumb. The god gasped and panted, hiding his face in the crook of Tony's neck, trailing his teeth and tongue over the inventor's throat and shoulder. The billionaire's right hand caressed Loki's spine lovingly, the fine film of perspiration slicking their bodies as the god ground his hips into Tony's hand seeking friction, then ran over the cleft of Loki's ass to massage at the perineum, making the god moan obscenely right next to Tony's ear. The inventor chuckled and purred kissing Loki's temple.

'Good?'

A sharp sting left by the immortal's teeth was enough of a reply for the inventor to repeat the motion, applying a bit more pressure this time. Loki's cock was intensely leaking precome as the god writhed atop the engineer sucking at his throat and biting his ear, hands twisted in Tony's short, ruffled hair.

The god finally lifted his head after a vicious twist of the inventor's wrist, his breath coming out in small puffs of hot air against Tony's lips. The dark mane was sticking to his sweaty forehead and Tony brushed the errant strands away caressing one sharp cheekbone in the process.

'Tony, I need...' Loki panted kissing the sole of his palm. 'Need you to...' His chest was heaving, cheeks flushed prettily and gray eyes glazed with lust. It was the most beautiful sight Tony could recall and he never wanted to let go this exquisite creature, his god of sharp cheekbones and curling hair. His, only *his*.

'Let me get the lube,' he said planting a quick kiss to the god's lips and scrambling towards the nightstand to blindly search for the bottle, his eyes never leaving the ethereal deity sprawled panting on the bed, the morning light bathing his ivory skin in warm hues. He could sit like that and just stare at the god for all eternity and be satisfied, but the way Loki bit his lower lip as his hand lay splayed on one thigh rubbing slowly up and down the exposed skin in a very sensual way prompted the inventor to search faster. His fingers finally bumped against the cool plastic and Tony grabbed the bottle to hastily return to his neglected lover. He sat next to Loki and poured a generous amount of lube on his hand. Meanwhile the immortal sat up and pushed Tony onto the pillows, once again straddling him.

'Babe...' the inventor gasped as Loki took both their cocks in hand and started pumping them languidly with long drawn-out strokes.

'Hurry,' the god whispered and Tony had a hard time taking his eyes of theirs erections closely pressed together, both rock hard. He reached out and experimentally pressed one slick finger, slowly entering the god. He pushed in to the second knuckle and retreated, scanning Loki's face for any sign of discomfort. Spotting none, he repeated the move a little faster and deeper. Loki sighed above him tightening his grip on their cocks.

'I am not from porcelain. I will not break.'

'I don't want to hurt you just because I'm impatient.'

'I know,' the god sighed again, 'but do hurry up.' He then pushed back against the mortal's hand urging him on. 'I want you.'

At those words a shudder ran over Tony's body and he quickened his pace. A second finger joined the first just a moment later and the inventor started scissoring them to open the god further. Loki whimpered above him, mouth slightly agape as his chest rose and fell with erratic gasps. He looked like a true god of debauchery then, all muscles taut and moving sinfully under the perfect ivory skin shining with perspiration and smelling of Tony and sex. The billionaire was mesmerized by the deity shamelessly riding him.

Suddenly the god growled, impatience written all over his face, and batted the engineer's hand away. He lifted his hips a few inches higher, guided Tony's cock to his entrance and then slowly, inch by agonizing inch lowered himself down until the billionaire's penis was fully sheathed inside him. Tony remained totally still giving Loki the time to adjust to his reasonable girth, he didn't even notice that he wasn't breathing until the god finally moved and they both gasped and moaned lewdly.

'Oh god, oh fuck... Loki...' Tony breathed putting both his hands on the immortal's hips, gripping tight as if his life depended on it. Above him the god closed his eyes and slowly lifted himself up again drawing another moan from the inventor. They were both dancing at the edge of completion, so close they could feel the moment rapidly approaching. The god fell forward supporting his weight on his elbows and stole Tony's lips. The kiss was filthy and teeth and blood and screamed *mine!*

'You feel so good inside me,' Loki breathed sultry against the inventor's skin. 'So hot... So thick.'

'Loki I...'

'I want you to come in me,' the god purred, his voice all smoke and velvet. 'I want you to mark me, claim me...' he continued, grinding his hips faster. Tony could feel the god's body trembling with pleasure as his hands roamed over his ribs and back. They were both so close. So very close. Tony wrapped his fingers around Loki's straining erection eliciting a strangled whine from the deity and stroked him in rhythm with the god's thrusts.

'Come for me babe...' he breathed huskily against Loki's sweaty temple feeling his own release building rapidly in the pit of his stomach. The god slammed his hips down one last time and came with Tony's name upon his lips, painting both their bodies with his cum. The mortal followed a moment after, one hand milking Loki's softening cock, the other around the deity's waist keeping him as close as possible. The immortal collapsed on top of him, totally spent, nose lazily nuzzling under the inventor's chin, his breath slowly returning to normal.

'Wow,' the billionaire chuckled, languidly carding his fingers through Loki's sweaty and tangled locks. 'I think I don't even have the energy to get up and get us cleaned.'

'Then stay,' Loki murmured sleepily.

'We're all sticky,' Tony observed, in truth not minding at all.

'I care not. Stay with me.'

'Okay Bambi,' Tony chuckled closing his eyes.

Two minutes later they were both fast asleep.



Tony woke up to a tingling feeling in his arm. He opened one eye, wary of the sun rays still streaming through the huge windows. His lover's warm body was pressed close to his right side, Loki's head resting on the engineer's shoulder. Stark smiled giddy with all sorts of warm feelings swarming in his chest. He wasn't really used to waking up to a lover still in his bed. The one night stands he always left to wake up on their own, and when he was with Pepper their schedules and sleeping habits just didn't match. Usually the redhead was up by the time he was turning in, unless they had sex before, but it happened less and less after some time, and they finally decided that this thing they had just wasn't working. But when Tony looked at Loki soundly sleeping beside him, wild dark hair fanned out on the pillow, soft as silk, he wanted, he **needed** to wake up like that every day. It was ridiculous, this need he felt to be close to the god, be able to touch him, trace a finger over his velvet cool skin and kiss those beautiful lips... The god was like a drug he couldn't live without anymore, but Tony wasn't even sure when the addiction started, when he became so reliant on the deity, he couldn't imagine being without him anymore. It was scary, and Tony got frightened for a moment by the onslaught of those foreign feelings taking over his mind and heart. But then the god stirred and murmured sleepily something distinctively reminding the billionaire's name, nuzzling his face into Tony's warm skin, and the insecurities left the inventor in the blink of an eye.

'You awake?' he smiled at the mop of dark hair, carding his fingers through it.

'No...' the god sighed sleepily, his breath tingling Stark's throat.

'No?' The genius chuckled and planted a light kiss on Loki's exposed shoulder.

Grunting, the god groggily lifted his head, the black halo of untamed curls framing his sharp cheekbones and jaw.

'What time is it?' He asked yawning as he stretched on top of the inventor.

'A good question. Jarvis?'

*'It's 4:35 PM sir.'* the AI replied.

'Oh, I think some breakfast is in order. You coming princess or should I serve you breakfast to bed?' Tony took an appreciating glance at the god's body. He was kind of disappointed that there were no marks left of their lovemaking on Loki's perfect skin, except the dried come... Yes a shower was in order and a change of sheets. 'Hm? What do you say?'

'I shall accept the offer of breakfast in bed.' The immortal smirked rearranging himself on the pillows.

'Yeah I have some nice ideas involving strawberry jam. Be right back.'

'But first,' Loki called after the engineer before the latter could leave the bedroom, 'I would like to know how is your heart faring?'

Tony stopped in his track, momentarily stunned by the question. Did the god demand a confession? Was he to proclaim his love to him, ring and all? He wasn't ready for that. Hell they spend one night together, admittedly it was in his top 10... maybe top 5 best nights ever, but...

'Jarvis?' Loki asked the AI.

'Oh! You mean the arc reactor? Yeah, okay... good idea. What can you tell us J?' Stark exhaled relieved. He almost had a heart attack.



*'During your earlier activities the arc reactor energy loss spiked to 11,64% and is currently working at 72,87% of its capacity.'*

The god frowned. 'That is a significant change. We should not have slept together.'

'Oh hell no! It is nothing, I had worse. Don't tell me you are starting to regret it?' Tony shot back moving towards the bed again. Loki scooted away from him to the other side of the bed. 'Loki!'

'It is for your safety Anthony. If we are not careful I could even kill you.'

'I could slip on the tiles in the bathroom and accidentally kill myself as easily!' The inventor ground his teeth and reached for the god. Loki freed his hand and stood up putting as much distance between them as it was possible.

'Please do not jest.'

'Fine, listen. Jarvis is monitoring the arc reactor 24/7. If the power drops down to 30% he will sound an alarm to notify us and I will remove myself from your presence to recharge. Okay?' He looked the god over admiring his naked ass, the only positive thing in this situation. 'In normal conditions the reactor produces slightly less energy than your seals can steal, so it's not that bad and we aren't together all the time so it will recharge just fine. There's no reason to panic.'

The immortal still didn't look convinced, but he reluctantly sat on the edge of the bed and reached a hand towards Tony's face, cool wave of magic preceding his fingertips by a fraction of a second.

'I do not wish to harm you,' Loki whispered burying his fingers in Tony's hair.

'You won't.'

They sat like that for a moment, both lost in their thoughts when suddenly Jarvis decided to chime in.

*'Sir, agent Romanoff asked me to relay a message to you. She requests a meeting between you, Mister Loki and her, regarding Mister Loki's stay at the Tower.'*

'I thought the topic was closed,' Tony looked at the god with furrowed brow.

*'Agent Romanoff said she needed the basic knowledge about the events leading Mister Loki and Mister Thor to become the Tower's permanent residents.'* Jarvis clarified.

'I think we can do that, but no guns or other S.H.I.E.L.D. tech. We're just going to talk. You okay with that Snowflake?' Tony picked up his t-shirt and handed Loki his clothes. The god hummed his thanks and answered.

'I suppose there is no harm in that.'

'Yeah... Damn! There goes my strawberry fantasy!' The inventor whined dramatically heading to the bathroom. They both needed a shower and he could grope Loki some more under the pretense of washing his back. Always a good plan!

~

They decided to meet in the comfortable lounge on Stark's floor. Loki wasn't inclined to travel far and he generally felt better on this floor that he knew best.

After the shower they ate quick breakfast/lunch and Tony, through Jarvis, invited Natasha over.

She came a few minutes later disturbing a heated discussion of blueberries' superiority over strawberries'. Apparently Stark was fond of dried fruit, stored in small pouches that he could nibble on while working and strawberries just didn't taste good dry. For Loki the matter was incomprehensible, why eat dry and hard fruit if you had unobstructed access to fresh ones? Some midgardian customs were indeed very queer.

The redheaded spy entered the lounge silently, taking advantage of the host's and his guest's distraction and observed keenly the interaction between a god and a genius. She had to interrupt them though when Stark offered to demonstrate the difference in flavor through a lip to lip offering. Natasha shuffled her feet loud enough for them to notice her presence and slowly came closer to the sofa occupied by the pair. The mood instantly shifted from playful to wary. The god became tense, his sharp line of shoulders straight, and the inventor's smile slipped into a more somber expression. Both changes were almost unnoticeable, but the well-trained eye of the assassin registered it nonetheless. They did not trust her. It was sad, because after forming the Avengers Natasha and Tony came to an understanding, and maybe became reluctant friends, but with the God of Mischief in the picture everything has changed.

'Ah Natasha, take a seat,' Stark gestured towards the second sofa. That way she would sit closer to him, while the god would be out of her immediate reach and behind Tony.

'Tony, Loki,' she greeted calmly sitting down. It wasn't a time for games. Natasha was curious and her hunger for answers could only be sated by this unorthodox duo. It was apparent that they were lovers even without seeing the huge bite mark on Stark's neck. Strange news as it was, the redhead wasn't really surprised. Tony's love of danger and self-destructive tendencies pushed him towards the Trickster god - one of the most dangerous and powerful creatures currently on this planet. Well formerly anyway, if the intel was accurate and the god's magic was sealed.

'Coffee? Tea? Vodka? I think I'll need something stronger for this conversation,' Stark said flippantly as he B-lined towards the liquor cabinet. 'Loki?'

'No, thank you,' the god sighed, 'I would like for this conversation to be quick, so ask your questions agent Romanoff.'

'Fine by me,' Natasha agreed nodding in thanks to Tony when he offered her a tumbler of scotch on ice. 'Let's start then. Why are you here?'

'My brother brought me here when he discovered what my punishment for transgressions against Asgard and Midgard was,' Loki stated, voice impassive.

'And what was it?'

'Can't you guess?' Tony growled from over the edge of his glass. He was gripping it so tightly his knuckles turned white.

'I would like to hear that from him, just for the record.' The redhead sipped her scotch slowly, savoring the excellent taste Stark had for liquor.

Loki leveled Natasha with his blank, unseeing eyes.

'First, I was chained like an animal and paraded through all the golden city to peasants' delight to be brought before the All-Father and obediently listen to his lecture and scorn. He then thrown me into a dungeon for months as he pondered the best way to punish me and set an example.' Loki's voice wavered just a bit. He absentmindedly started rubbing his right wrist, where the phantom chains from his memories shackled him still. Tony wanted to hug him really bad.

'When the king finally made up his mind, I was summoned again as the verdict was read out.'

'What was it?' Natasha asked silencing Tony before he could protest again. 'I need to know.'

'Being chained down in a dark, damp cell, deep under the roots of Asgard where no soul could aid me, an enchanted construct hovering over dripping venom onto my eyes so I could not descry my prey. My lips sewn shut, so I could not spew lies with my silver tongue. My *Seiðr* bound, so no one would suffer my treachery ever again. My cell sealed, so I could rot in solitude, slowly descending into madness.'

Tony stood up abruptly, ice crinkling in his empty tumbler. He was seething with anger and wanted to destroy something, anything, preferably Odin's skull. Memories of his own torture flashed behind his eyelids and he could feel a panic attack approaching rapidly. His breathing became elevated and he was on the verge of crumbling to the floor, Natasha be damned, when cool fingers slipped into his hand and squeezed lightly. He breathed in deeply once, twice, slowly calming down, Loki's hand in his an anchor. He suddenly felt ashamed; it was his role to give support to the god, not the other way around. Tony sat back down, mentally exhausted, his hand still clutching the god's. Loki scooted closer so theirs shoulders were touching. Natasha didn't utter a word, taken aback by the display of affection. She thought them to be lovers by convenience, fuck buddies, the thing they had a short fling, until the god would inevitably grow bored. But was it possible that she was mistaken? That this, whatever it was, was something more genuine? Only time would tell.

'Does this answer your questions, agent Romanoff?' Loki asked quietly, his eyes closed.

'Yes, for now. I still have questions concerning the Chitauri and attack on New York, but it can wait.'

Natasha stood up fluidly, suddenly strangely uncomfortable. 'Thank you,' she nodded towards them both and left. Before the elevator doors shut close she took a last glance at the pair. Tony pressed his forehead to Loki's and embraced him whispering something to the god while the deity pressed his face into the crook of Tony's neck.

Natasha sighed and massaged her temples. With those two things were always so complicated.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 16

The Christmas came and went almost unnoticed. Pepper was busy somewhere in Europe doing Stark Industries business so there wasn't really anyone at hand that could force Tony Stark to attend a Christmas dinner. Steve tried obviously, but the inventor was too preoccupied with upgrading his newest suit to really notice. He and Loki had a little dinner of their own, later that evening from the leftovers left by the team and maybe Tony felt a little guilty for not attending the celebration, but the gifts that would be delivered later in the night would have to be enough of an apology. The one for Loki (that Tony spent whole two days worrying about) was currently stored in the inventor's pocket.

'You remember how I told you that there was a tradition to exchange presents on Christmas?' Stark started fidgeting awkwardly with the box. 'I have something... It's just... if you won't like it... uh. I...'

'Anthony, 'Loki sighed smiling at his lover. 'I am certain it is a most magnificent gift.'

'Yeah, well I hope so,' he opened the box and took out a delicate, intricately made, gold chain with an upside down triangle dangling from it and put it in the god's palm.

'Is that...' Loki took the small ornament between his fingers feeling the edges.

'The arc reactor, yeah. Well it's supposed to look like it.'

'Thank you,' the immortal inclined his head but the frown marring his brow, as his fingers played with the chain, made Stark's smile fall.

He knew it; the god didn't like the gift. It was a bad idea from the start, but what else could he give to a millennium old deity? He swallowed his nerves and asked.

'What is it?'

'I do not have anything to give you in return.'

'Don't worry about it Snowflake, just give me a thank you kiss and we're even. I have everything I need.' Tony laughed relieved. And Loki gifted him the sweetest and the longest kiss ever and then some.

~

It was late afternoon on the 31st of December when the alarm went off. Tony was finishing rigging this year's firework installation, the siren almost giving him a heart attack.

'Fuck! I need to change that sound. What's up J?' The engineer taped together the last cluster of

wires and stood up wiping his hands on his pants.

'It would appear sir that Hydra has launched another attack.'

'I swear, they are more resilient than cockroaches,' Tony sighed. 'Prepare the suit. Who else responded?'

Just as he finished the question a loud crack of thunder pierced his eardrums, the sound penetrating his flesh to the core.

'Except Thor,' Stark grunted descending the staircase from the roof in a hurry before the inevitable rain would start pouring from the sky, all thanks to the residing God of Thunder.

'Captain Rogers and Hawkeye sir,' Jarvis replied from the inventor's phone.

'Where's Bruce?' Tony hopped from the three remaining steps and hurried to the assembling rings on the balcony. Just as the first components rose from under the floor the doors to the lounge opened and Loki strutted out.

'In Chicago on an environmental symposium sir, he will be back next week.' the AI said a second after the helmet was secured on Stark's head.

A moment later Steve's voice cracked in the comm.

'Iron man do you copy?'

'Yup, I'm here.' Tony turned towards Loki and snaked an armored arm around his waist.

'Anthony...' the god gasped right before his lips were sealed by a searing kiss.

'We'll finish this quickly,' Tony whispered against Loki's moist lips. 'And then we'll celebrate.'

Steve was reciting instructions into the comm, but the engineer was entirely focused on the deity before him. Loki's hair started to curl from the rain that finally joined the party, quiet pitter-patter against Tony's armor. He looked beautiful like that, cheeks pink from the kiss, small droplets of water clinging to his eyelashes and black locks, shining in the occasional lightning like stars on the night sky.

'Be careful,' the god said and stepped back giving the inventor more space to take off.

'It's just Hydra,' Tony laughed. 'They wouldn't know what to do with a nuke even if someone gifted them one. Be back soon.'

As the thrusters carried him away, a sudden thought bloomed in his mind: Loki naked against the shower wall, flushed from steam and panting Tony's name, the inventor buried deep inside him. Stark grunted when suddenly his suit became too tight in certain places and promised himself to finish this farce quickly, so the fantasy could become reality.

He followed the directions provided by Jarvis and soon arrived at the scene, the quinjet hot on his heels, where Thor was summoning lightning against...

'Robotic spiders?' Tony snorted. 'Are you shitting me? That's so cliché!'

The metal arachnids were the size of a dog and barely managed to reach to the Thunderer's knees, but they swarmed all around him making it harder and harder to swing Mjölnir properly. Another clash of thunder roared from the gray sky, followed shortly by a lightning bolt that struck the god's



hammer. Thor ground it hard into the pavement sending a powerful shockwave in all directions tripping the robots and stunning them.

Tony whistled impressed a bit, but his smile soon turned into a grimace when the constructs started to rise again, their beady red eyes shining brighter than before.

'Thor!' the inventor shouted, 'I think they feed on electricity. You are charging their batteries!'

More insectoids spilled from the side alleys swarming around the Avengers on all sides. Stark cursed and shot into the air avoiding an attack aimed at his back. He shot the offender with a well-aimed repulsor blast, pivoted and grabbed Hawkeye by the collar of his vest.

'Aghr! A warning next time Stark!' Clint shouted landing hard on a roof of a convenience store.

'I'm still pissed at you Katniss.' Tony's mechanical voice responded from the suit's speakers.

Barton just flipped him off without a feeling. After the incident with Loki Stark came to him pissed off like an enraged bull, punched him a few times and explicitly recounted the surgery they had to perform on Loki to save his life. Then, still shouting, told him what would happen if he even laid one finger on the god again. It was a fucking scary experience. Hawkeye never saw Tony this mad. They fought over stupid things before, but only then Clint finally understood why Tony Stark (not Iron man) was marked by S.H.I.E.L.D. as an extremely dangerous individual.

And after shouting himself hoarse, he left. Just like that. Without even looking back.

To be fair, the whole revenge thing didn't feel as satisfying as he thought it would. Loki was an easy target right now and the anger in Clint died out pretty quickly after the first moment of glee of getting retribution. And when Thor came back from London and visited him to have words. Well, let's just say Clint learned his lesson. But he still couldn't fathom what Stark saw in the deranged god.

A loud explosion tore Hawkeye away from his thoughts. Another swarm of robots joined the fight.

~

Loki relocated to the workshop right after Iron man's departure. He felt better here, surrounded by the calming buzz of Jarvis' computers, with Dummy keeping him company while he waited for Tony. The small robot would sometimes feel especially endearing around the god and pinch his clothes to get some attention. When it happened for the first time it startled Loki, but Tony only laughed and explained that it's the way the bot shows affection. After that Loki would sometimes talk to him when Tony was away on a mission or work related meeting and Dummy would whistle back. Maybe it made them both feel a little bit less lonely without the inventor in close proximity.

The distance has become a problem thanks to the sigils. Stark insisted that there was no danger to his life, but Loki would rather play it safe than endanger the engineer's health. Immediate skin contact was the worst and transferred the most energy between their bodies. Tony complained when Loki wouldn't stay for the whole night in his bed, but the god was glad for even the few hours they spend together entangled intimately.

The immortal was listening to his favorite playlist, one hand fiddling with Dummy's wiring when all of a sudden the speakers cracked distorting the sound just to go silent entirely in the next moment.

'Jarvis?' Loki enquired. When there was no answer he stood up quietly. 'Dummy, go to your docking station,' he whispered listening intensely to any unusual sounds. The robot obeyed and

when he finally reached his destination and shut down Loki noticed that the workshop was totally silent. There was no buzz of computers or the soft sound of air conditioning. Nothing. The god concluded that there had to be a power outage, but Tony once explained to him how the big arc reactor supplying electricity to the tower worked. It was not easy to shut it down. One had to have extensive knowledge about the technology and as far as Loki was aware it could only be done by Tony, Pepper and probably Natasha.

A loud bang coming from the glass door separating the workshop from the hallway got his attention and Loki crouched behind the sofa just in time to shield himself from an explosion that tore apart the entryway. Shards of reinforced glass were thrown so far some rained all around the deity and a second later a thick cloud of smoke invaded his nostrils.

Loki tentatively reached out with his magic making a quick reconnaissance. There were people coming through the wrecked wall. He counted ten inside, one of them female and additional six outside, standing guard. At first he thought it was agent Romanoff with S.H.I.E.L.D. soldiers coming for him, taking the opportunity to detain him while all the other Avengers were out. Her movements were very similar to the spy's, but then she shouted some orders to her cohorts and Loki couldn't recognize the voice. It didn't really matter, they were hostile, they wanted something from the workshop and Loki would not allow it. He retreated further into the clustered space where all Tony's worktables stood. He assumed that it was dark there thanks to the attackers and that they probably had a light source of their own.

Once again his disability put him at a major disadvantage. What once would have been an easy exercise now proved to be a problem. Loki didn't know how equipped the soldiers were. Was there light or darkness? Would moving expose him to their sight or was he shrouded in shadows? The god swore mentally. He was forced to operate blind, without weapons and intel.

Yet there was no time for elaborate plans. Jarvis was down so Loki had no way to contact Tony. He was on his own. It was time to move.

Crouching low and keeping as many furniture as possible between himself and the invaders the god moved stealthily towards the entrance. His only option was to take down quietly as many soldiers as he could before the inevitable confrontation.

He just slid behind a tool station barely in time to avoid being seen. It was hard to keep constant focus on the spell allowing him to move between objects without colliding with anything. This time he had to be precise which required more power, to not reveal himself by throwing something from a table or tripping on wires haphazardly lying on the ground everywhere.

A throb squeezed his temples like a sudden change in pressure, but he kept going.

'The motherboard of Stark's computer should be somewhere at the back.' The woman said suddenly. 'You and you, go check there. You search for blueprints of anything looking important.'

They wanted to steal Jarvis? Why? It unsettled Loki. Someone had intimate knowledge of the workshop's layout and its components. This was bad, he had to hurry.

Stepping a bit faster he finally managed to move into a position behind one of the soldiers. Regrettably he couldn't just dispose of him, surely it would alert Heimdall and he would inform Odin that Loki had killed another mortal. Then he'd be forced to go back to Asgard for another punishment.

Fast as a viper Loki shot up from his crouching position and wound his hands around the mortal's neck, squeezing with enough force to render the human unconscious. When the body finally

sagged against his he lowered it gently to the ground.

One down.

~

Tony's back hit the wall hard enough for him to see stars. He snarled behind the faceplate, pissed off beyond words. Those little Hydra fuckers were so god damn annoying! It was supposed to be a quick mission. Fly out, shoot some metal scrap, fly back in. But nooo. The constructs were very resilient. You had to practically rip them all apart for the fuckers to finally stop moving. There was a huge mound of metal parts all around them from dismembering their foes, but they just kept coming! Tony fervently wished for Bruce to be here. Hulk would have a field day and maybe they wouldn't have to waste so much time.

Stark shot a repulsor blast straight between the LED eyes of another spider and gasped for air. At some point one of the things shot him down from the sky and almost face-planted harshly against the pavement the billionaire had cracked a rib. They all were faring quite badly. Cap's uniform was torn in a lot of places, shallow cuts bleeding all over. Clint ran out of arrows and was now forced to fight with a knife, ripping wires and mechanical limbs alike. Thor had to lose the cape, because the things took it upon themselves to climb it to reach the god's head.

Tony moved out of reach of another tentacle and shot into the sky for a short reprieve.

'Sir.' A note of alarm in Jarvis' voice made the inventor hover in the air distracted. *'I have detected an anomaly in the Tower's systems.'*

'What anomaly?' Stark grunted removing a spider from Cap's back.

*'I cannot get access to the workshop sir. Live feed has been terminated and it would seem my mainframe is not responding.'*

'How is that possible? Connect me to Loki, maybe he can check it out.'

*'Impossible sir. His last known location is the workshop.'* the AI sounded regretful.

'Fuck! Go through the camera footage leading to the floor.' Another spider ended as a twisted piece of garbage under Iron man's boot.

*'Sir, the footage has been tempered with.'*

'HOW?! God damn it. Cap! We have a situation.'

'I noticed,' Steve grunted bashing his shield against two robots.

'At the Tower.' Stark landed next to the Captain.

'What happened?'

'I don't know. Possible security breach. Jarvis cannot determine who's behind this and my workshop went dark.' Tony's gut twisted painfully. Loki was somewhere out there. If something would happen to the god again, he wouldn't be able to forgive himself.

'Maybe Jarvis malfunctioned?' Steve threw the shield at a swarm managing to damage several of the constructs in one go.

'No,' Tony growled impatiently, 'he does not malfunction.'

'Tony we need you here, we have to wait for S.H.I.E.L.D.'

'Steve Loki's all alone there.' Stark almost pleaded.

'We'll get overrun without you.'

The inventor swore creatively and started destroying Hydra's minions with renewed force.

It took S.H.I.E.L.D. good ten minutes to finally show up at the scene pouring from around the corner and blasting the wretched creatures to pieces.

'Sorry we're late,' Coulson said joining them.

'You walked here or what? Cap I need to go.' Tony urged ready to blast into the air.

'Wait.'

'Steve...'

'Just a moment. Let me brief Coulson quickly,' he then addressed the agent. 'There is a situation at Stark Tower...'

Suddenly a loud explosion caught their attention and Tony watched in horror as pieces of concrete poured down from a gaping hole in the side of his tower followed by a thick, black smoke and red flames. A cold hand of fear gripped his throat and squeezed.

'We're going! NOW!' Tony gripped Steve's hand tightly and with a grunt of effort they lifted from the ground. He was shaking inside the suit, memories of Loki's screams fresh in his mind.

'Jarvis faster,' he breathed.

*'I'm sorry sir, we're going as fast as we can.'*

Tony watched with hammering heart as thick clouds of smoke rose to the sky and prayed to any deity that would listen for Loki to be safe.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 17

Loki grunted laying another unconscious body on the ground. It took him a long time to dispose of only those four opponents. A splitting headache pulsed between his temples making it hard to concentrate on maintaining the locator spell, yet he had no other choice but to persevere. Jarvis was down and there were no other means of communication available to him. Loki wasn't sure if Tony was even aware what transpired in the tower. Someone had arranged the events perfectly, luring the Avengers out of their base and attacked when it was the most vulnerable.

Luck was still on the immortal's side. He managed to remain undetected, obscured by shadows, and meticulously worked towards his goal. Thank the Norns Tony was a paranoid man and he went to great lengths to assure Jarvis' safety. The soldiers, Loki assumed that they were also from this Hydra, were currently trying to force open the thick reinforced doors protecting the AI's motherboard and archives. It gave the god an opportunity to be a little more careless, his missteps covered by the loud banging. He needed to get to the female, she appeared to be the leader of this group.

Loki listened as she talked about something called C4 and that if other methods would turn out ineffective it would be their last resort.

A sudden click behind the god's head made his body go rigid. Adrenaline shot through his veins as he prepared himself for the impending fight.

'Don't move!' a man shouted from behind grinding the barrel of a gun into his skull. The god cursed. So much for good luck.

'Soldier, report!' the woman shouted from somewhere to the right, her footsteps getting closer by the second.

Not wasting another moment Loki swiftly ducked away from the gun, kicked the opponent in the knee (a satisfying crack told him he broke it out of the socket), then with a sharp turn of his wrist disarmed the warrior and rendered him unconscious precisely applying pressure to his jugular. Yet he didn't manage to roll out of the way in time and got hit by a bullet shot from someplace in the workshop. The projectile penetrated his left shoulder, and before he could recover another grazed his throat. The deity growled ducking under one of Tony's many workbenches. Now he was trapped.

'You are surrounded. Come out! There's no place for you to hide!' she shouted.

Loki could feel how his tainted *Seiðr* rushed towards the wound trying to close it. He had to force it away to prevent himself from going into shock. A blood loss from such a wound would not be fatal, at least not for some time. But if he would let it get healed, once again the sigils would react unfavorably. He could not let that happen. However his options here were severely limited. Exhausted from the constant use of magic, with splitting headache and now wounded he was an easy target.



But he was Loki, a prince of two realms. He would not be defeated by some lowly curs.

He concentrated on the locator spell, adjusted it so that it would not show details anymore (he had no strength for that) and clutched in his right hand a long, sharp scrap of metal - his improvised dagger. The magic told him that the soldiers were trying to surround him. Quietly he shuffled backwards and to the right, in the last moment avoiding a collision with U's docking station. That gave him an idea. In ideal circumstances he wouldn't resort to such measures, endangering Stark's children, but if he wanted to survive this and protect Jarvis, he saw no other way.

'Dum-E, U, Butterfingers,' he whispered, 'protect Jarvis.'

Dum-E was the first to react, whirring to life loudly. Loki moved out of the way just in time to avoid a series from a semiautomatic gun. The bot, with his favorite toy at hand - the fire extinguisher, instantaneously gathered the attention of their enemies, giving the god some time to regroup. He grimaced as another salvo of bullets flew just inches from his head, shattering some unfinished project.

Noticing an opening, Loki stood swiftly and threw his improvised weapon at the nearest opponent effectively disarming him. He then ducked forward and punched him with an open palm right in the solar plexus. The soldier was thrown a few meters back and hit the wall slumping unconscious to the floor.

The leader shouted orders in a shrill voice demanding for Loki to be shot down.

The god once again took cover, needing a moment to gather his wits and estimate his next target's whereabouts. Just as he was about to jump out once more, an explosion shook the tower, raining debris all around him.

'We're through!' someone shouted.

Desperation washed over the deity and he abandoned his cover to stop the enemy from reaching Jarvis. Without any regard to his own safety he grabbed another foot soldier and used him as a shield, just to a moment later discard his limp body pierced by a dozen bullets.

The god panted heavily skidding away from a knife someone has thrown his way. He was running on reserves. It was getting increasingly harder to maintain a grip on the *Seiðr-flow* in his body, keeping it away from the wounds. He was also bleeding profoundly, the blood loss making his limbs sluggish and moves slow.

He had to fight his way through to the enormous hole the explosion tore in the outer wall, a cold gust of air tangling his sweaty hair. The god's body shook from exhaustion and now it had become an effort to dodge the attacks.

Then suddenly a heavenly sound reached his ears - a roar of the Iron man's repulsors, as Tony flew in through the ruined wall.

'You fucking parasites!' he shouted, voice slightly distorted by the suit's speakers.

Loki sighed. For him the fight was over. Tony (and who was with him? The Captain?) could take care of the remaining soldiers without his help.

Deeper in the ruined workshop the woman tsked. 'The mission failed, let's move out. Here's farewell gift to you.'

Something small, like a rock landed close to Loki. He heard his name being shouted by Tony, but

then the world was engulfed by heat and smoke and he lost consciousness.

~

The next time he woke up, his ears were ringing and his body felt like it had been trampled by a Bilgesnipe. Loki wanted to move, but something heavy pinned him down. He felt around with his hands and discovered that it was the Iron man suit.

'Anthony,' the god croaked, his throat parched. Yet the body above him remained unresponsive. With the last vestiges of strength he shook it, a sudden panic rising like bile in his throat.

'Anthony!' he tried again to no avail.

A shuffling sound to his left made him growl, but he was effectively immobilized by the unconscious body on top of him. He once again tried to move it and his hands found blood and lacerated tissue.

Inhaling deeply, he held back a scream.

'Loki, it's me.' The Captain said quickly moving closer. He then lifted the limp body of off Loki.

The immortal whined gripping Tony's forearms as tightly as his exhausted muscles allowed.

'What happened to him?'

'He shielded you from a plasma grenade.' Steve said helping Loki sit up, Tony's body now on the god's tights. 'We need to get him to a hospital, ASAP.'

'No! There is no time,' the god panted, 'I... I will heal him, but you have to remove the suit and any visible foreign objects from his wounds... You will have to guide me.'

Steve nodded and knelt next to the deity. He found the manual release and the armor slowly unfolded exposing Stark's damaged back and shoulders. The wounds looked gruesome. Some parts of the suit got embodied into the flesh and they had to be removed before attempting any kind of healing. The Captain took off his gloves and guided Loki's trembling hands to the biggest wound.

'Let's start with that.'

~

The healing process went insanely slow. Steve assumed that it was partially thanks to that that Loki looked like death himself. His shoulder was shot through and he was bleeding from a dozen smaller wounds. But his expression screamed *determination*, so the Captain didn't comment and just helped as best as he could.

They treated maybe half of the inventor's back when a sudden gust of wind heralded the arrival of Thor and Clint.

'Oh man what a mess,' the archer whined, lightly jumping over a fallen pillar. When he noticed Steve and Loki his eyes bulged out. 'What the hell? What happened?'

'A plasma grenade,' Steve said, tired.

Thor came closer without a word and for a moment observed his brother's doings. By this point Loki was sweating profoundly. His jaw muscles were so taunt that it was a miracle that his teeth didn't shatter.

'Loki that's enough,' The Thunderer boomed. It sounded more like an order than a request, but the Trickster just ignored him and continued what he was doing.

'Loki!' Thor stepped closer. In the background Clint nocked an arrow on the bowstring.

'Go away Thor,' the younger god grunted with effort.

Steve looked between the siblings confused. Why would Thor want to stop his brother from healing Tony?

'What's going on?' the Captain asked but he was mostly ignored.

'Loki you are going to kill yourself,' the Thunderer growled gripping the raven-haired god by the elbow. 'That's enough!'

'No! His wounds are too grave, he needs treatment.'

'And what about you?' Thor asked, his face darkening like a thunder cloud.

'It doesn't matter,' Loki whispered. He was ashen pale, the only color came from the blood on his shaking hands. In fact, his whole body shook, Steve observed. He noticed some of the sigils moving quickly under the god's translucent skin. They looked like parasites. And then he understood. Loki wasn't just exhausted. Thanks to the Odin's bindings the god's magic was eating him from the inside. Steve recalled that when they came here Loki explained that using magic caused him pain, but they all assumed healing was different, because he used it numerous times to aid them after battles, especially on Tony. It would seem the Trickster tricked them all, as it was in his nature.

A pained grunt suddenly tore itself from Tony's throat as he tried to lift himself from the ground.

'Don't move,' Steve put a reassuring hand on his freshly healed shoulder.

The inventor slumped back, breathing hard.

'What happened?' his voice came out muffled from the vicinity of Loki's hip.

'You are a bloody moron,' Loki hissed relocating his hand to a next laceration.

'What?' Tony lifted his head and a shudder ran over his spine. 'Ow...'

'Don't...' the god said faintly and a moment later promptly collapsed on top of the billionaire.

~

The beeping of medical machinery almost drove him mad. After laying flat on his belly for four days Tony's hands itched from boredom. He was confined to a bed in the medical bay, a part of his shoulder sustaining third degree burns courtesy of the intruders. In a bed next to his slept Loki, once again under a heavy dose of painkillers and sedatives. They had to charter one of Stark Industry's planes to get Bruce back from Chicago, because Tony absolutely refused to let any S.H.I.E.L.D. doctor close to his god.

And Tony? Tony was royally pissed. He wanted to scream and tear everything in this fucking white room apart. Most of all he wanted to punch Loki in the face. He of course was infinitely grateful for what the god did to protect Jarvis and the inventor alike. But the cost of that protection was something Tony wasn't willing to let him pay. He somehow felt cheated, betrayed, unworthy

of the god's trust. And that stung. How many times did Loki heal him? And how many times did he ask him to heal the others? Now that Tony thought about it, Thor always refused the treatment, probably knowing what it entailed.

He wanted to blow something up, maybe that would lift his mood.

And there was also the attack. Was it Hydra? That was the only explanation that came to mind, how else would they know when to strike. Why would they target Jarvis? And why now? Who provided them with his tower's schematics? And what else was in their possession? So many questions, so little answers...

In the other bed Loki stirred and sighed opening his unseeing, grey eyes.

'Welcome back from the land of the dead,' Tony greeted sourly.

The god blinked and lifted himself from the bed.

'Don't. You'll rip the IV out.'

'Anthony...'

'Oh, don't Anthony me. I'm pissed at you.' He gasped when a sudden move jarred his injured shoulder.

'Why? What did I do?' The god furrowed his brow, confusion plainly written on his pale face.

'You lied to me!' With some maneuvering Tony managed to sit up, what allowed him to look properly at the god.

'You told me that healing magic used the injured person's energy to heal them, not the caster's! You told me healing magic wasn't designed to hurt, yet you suffer by applying it! Why is that?' Tony shouted. He had to fist his hands in the sheets to prevent himself from going to Loki and shaking his bony ass.

'Why does it matter?' The god asked. He wasn't facing the engineer, instead his blind eyes looked at the wall.

'Why...? **WHY?! Because I would fucking want to know that my whims are fucking hurting my lover!**' Stark panted heavily. He knew that unloading his frustration on Loki was unfair, but it fucking hurt to not be trusted.

While the god remained silent, he took a few calming breaths and started again.

'Why does it hurt you? Aren't you helping people while healing then?'

To that Loki chuckled mirthlessly. He outstretched a hand towards the inventor and his fingers grazed Tony's hot skin, right over the place where his heart beat strongly.

'With one concentrated, well-aimed thought I could convince your heart to die,' he then moved his hand towards the center of Tony's chest, under the arc reactor, 'or your lungs to collapse.'

Tony took his hand and kissed every single knuckle.

'But you wouldn't.'

'No, no I wouldn't.' The god sighed, seemingly all energy leaving his body. 'You do things to me

Tony Stark I do not understand.'

'Yeah, I love you too Snowflake,' Tony blurted out before his brain caught on. They both stilled for a fraction of a second, Loki's hand still clutched between Tony's fingers. The engineer thought about what he said for a moment and shrugged.

'Yeah, I fucking do.' He then pushed Loki onto the pillows and thoroughly ravaged him lips. The god's arms encircled his torso, squeezing hard, as if his life depended on it. They kissed slowly, lovingly, discovering themselves anew, tasting and mapping everything they loved about each other. The Trickster's hands roamed over the well-chiseled plains of Tony's back, fingers dipping between the vertebrae of the mortal's spine, caressing his sides. The inventor's fingers were tangled in Loki's long, black tresses, the other hand dangling from the bed still attached to the IV.

Suddenly Stark hissed painfully against the god lips. Loki's hands stopped and vanished from his back.

'My apologies.'

'It's nothing,' Tony grunted lifting himself a bit on the uninjured shoulder.

'Allow me to heal...'

'No!'

'Anthony, do not be stubborn. It will take but a moment. I do not wish to see you suffer.' Loki said tracing his fingertips over Tony's stubble.

'Right back at you babe. You barely recovered.'

'It is nothing.'

'Loki.'

The god sighed. 'Do not make me beg.' His hands fell away leaving cool traces on the billionaire's skin. Tony studied his face for a long time before finally giving in.

'Fine, but do it slowly. And if it's too much you will stop immediately. You understand?'

'Doing it slowly will only prolong your suffering.' The god clarified.

'Do you understand?' Stark repeated putting emphasis on each word.

'Yes.'

'Good. Now, I think we need to join those beds, because my ass is dangling from the edge and it's really uncomfortable.'

~ ~ ~



## Chapter 18

*The heat was excruciating. He couldn't breathe, he couldn't think. The air all around almost boiled, wave after hot, heavy wave forcing him flat against the ground. With blistered fingers he reached out towards the body lying close by, scorched and motionless.*

***Dead. He is dead!*** His mind screamed suffocating in the all-encompassing inferno.

*Without taking notice of his own burned flesh, he crawled forward, leaving behind a smeared trail of almost instantly drying blood and soot.*

*Only one word managed to leave his burned lips in a forced, shallow exhale.*

*'Anthony...'*

**'LOKI!'**

He gasped, lungs constricting with imagined smoke, yet the blissfully cold air wouldn't fill his burning body. He choked, but tried again nevertheless, to no avail. Jerking away from the bed, limbs ensnared in sweat-soaked expensive covers he howled. He would die in this wretched inferno. Suddenly a pair of lips descended upon his parched ones and forced oxygen into his treacherous body. Finally being able to breath, albeit shallowly, Loki gasped.

'God damn it babe, listen to me!' A voice hollered above him, a familiar voice. 'Come on, breath!'

As ordered he inhaled deeply and choked again, but some air managed to penetrate his burning lungs. Another frantic gasp and this time it stayed in. Slowly Loki learned to breathe again.

'That's right. Just like that.'

Nimble hands freed him from the damp sheets and helped him into a sitting position.

'Fuck, babe you gave me a scare.'

*Anthony. Alive. Thank the Norns.*

'Tony...' The god breathed relieved against the inventor's neck. It was a dream, just a bad dream.

'Jesus Bambi what happened? For a moment there you stopped breathing.'

Loki just nuzzled his nose right under the billionaire's ear and breathed in his scent: fire, iron and power. 'I need... I need to go outside.'

'Okay... Well it's almost 5 a.m., probably not many people are around at this hour. We could perhaps go to Central Park for a walk. No one would disturb us this early,' Tony grimaced remembering their failed date. 'Sounds good?'

When the god nodded the inventor stood up pulling him to his feet.

'But first you need a shower.'

~

They strolled unhurried over the well-used pathways. Loki's hypersensitive nerves slowly calmed down partly thanks to the tranquil atmosphere of the park and crisp morning air surrounding them, and partly thanks to Tony's hand in his, their fingers intertwined, grounding and solid.

He's been confined to the few floors in the tower for such a long time (with exception of their disastrous date) that it felt really refreshing to finally be able to breath air not repeatedly filtered by the air conditioning system.

They strode mostly in silence, both deep in thoughts, traversing the sidewalks that soon would fill with runners and usual morning activity and Loki pondered his dream. It felt disconcertingly real as if he was reliving that dreadful moment from the damn attack once again and even more intense that it was in reality. It felt different than all those dreams before, more tangible and powerful. The whole ordeal with the night terrors was unnerving. In his long life Loki never experienced so many nightmares so frequently. Of course he occasionally had them, but now they occurred in unnatural numbers. He entertained a few theories to why that was so. In the void and then straight after he willed himself not to dream at all, afraid of what he could encounter while on dreamscape, dreamless slumber seemed better, kinder in that situation and his magic helped. Now he was cut off from it, thus dream-manipulation was out of the question thanks to Odin's snares. The sigils could be a part of the problem, in fact Loki was certain that they were, because the nightmares started soon after his imprisonment in the bellows of the golden city eternal.

The god frowned trying to recall the first one. He vaguely remembered it involving the Other's hideous visage spouting uncouth threats his way. After that it was quiet for a time, the madness inhabiting his mind seemed to recede to some dark, lonely corner to just die quietly, but it was just a ruse. It attacked once again bringing in gifts of new horrors after the All-Father bound his *Seiðr*, thus taking away his only defense. Later the nightmares came in spades, sometimes in form of old memories, twisted and macabre, sometimes as glimpses of his future, where he was left alone and forgotten, the wretched construct of Odin's his only companion. They never came as often as now. And Loki could guess why.... If he thought about it for a moment, there was no other option. Stark's creation, the arc reactor, its power kin to the Tesseract poisoned him, sipping into his body and mind through the sigils day and night. Without any proper way out it accumulated inside of him, his normally miniscule use of magic not able to cleanse the excessive foreign energy. Except on a few occasions the most spell casting he did was for healing, and he tried to use only his pure *Seiðr* for that, afraid of negatively influencing someone's mind like he did with Barton using Thanos' scepter to amplify the spell.

Loki clenched his hands in silent rage. The Fates truly enjoyed tormenting him. When finally, finally! he managed to find some happiness, a person he could talk to for hours upon hours, when he felt loved and loved in return, every force around them schemed to tear them apart. If they stayed together there might come a day when Loki would go mad from the residue power of the Tesseract, or worse - Odin's sigils would sap away the reactor's power thus killing Tony. Loki couldn't decide which was worse.

'Babe? You ok?' Tony asked suddenly, his beautiful voice reaching the god and summoning him

from the dark recesses of his psyche.

'Yes, thank you. I am fine now,' the immortal sighed.

'You are hurting me you know.'

The god startled at those words whipping his head in Tony's direction.

'Your hand?' Stark prompted. 'You're crushing my fingers.'

Loki let go instantly, cursing himself.

'My apologies.'

'What's wrong?' The inventor asked grabbing Loki's fingers again and tucking both their hands in his coat's pocket.

'Nothing, I am merely enjoying the morning air,' Loki said without conviction. A pointed silence followed his statement.

'You know,' Tony started, his voice calm, 'I think I spend enough time with you to guess when you are trying to bullshit me.'

They stopped and the engineer tugged Loki down to sit on a bench. The wind blew around them bringing with it a promise of even colder weather.

'You want to talk about it?' Stark cuddled close to the deity sharing warmth. It was starting to snow, lazy, fluffy snowflakes swirling in the light of dawn.

The god stayed quiet for a time, analyzing if his worries were worth sharing. Tony had enough problems as it was, burdening him with another one would add to nothing and yet when Stark brushed his cold fingers over Loki's jaw to look him in the eyes, the god could do nothing but sigh (he did that quite a lot recently).

'My nightmares. They are getting more frequent.'

Tony frowned; he actually thought there were fewer of them.

'How didn't I know that? Weren't they supposed to affect me too? Why didn't you tell me?'

'I just did,' the god's mouth quirked up in a small smile.

'Loki!'

'Not every dream is strong enough to reach out to you and I did not for some time connect the signs.'

'Signs of what?' Stark asked alarmed. He had an uneasy feeling that the answer wouldn't be to his liking.

'The Tesseract is calling to me. It whispers in my dreams, cajoles. I can hear it even now,' the god explained.

'What does that mean?'

'It poisons my mind with its will. I do not have any protection against it Anthony, it festers in my

mind, grows stronger with each passing day while I am marked by those sigils, and one day it may robe me of my sanity entirely.'

Loki closed his eyes; for once being glad he couldn't see his lover's expression.

'It's because of the arc reactor, isn't it?' Tony asked, his voice hollow. 'It's because of me.'

'By the Norns,' Loki exclaimed horrified, 'that is not what I meant! This is not your fault. If there is someone to blame it is either me or Odin, but not you, never you my love.'

'Loki...'

The god kissed the corner of his lips lightly. Snowflakes shone in his black, curly hair like diamonds and Tony thought that he looked really beautiful. He kissed him back, slowly, intimately, savoring this quiet moment and committing it to memory. They kissed for a long time, the snow slowly dancing around them in its own intricate dance. Was it too much to ask; to be happy together, without villains and heroes and shady organizations.

*Just Tony and Loki.*

Apparently it was, because not a moment later Tony's phone vibrated in his pocket. Puffing out a white cloud of air in annoyance he took out the device and peered at the display.

*Sir, the construction workers have arrived.*

'What is it?' Loki asked.

'The construction workers are at the Avengers Tower. I don't want to leave them alone in the workshop.'

'We shall go back then.'

'You sure you're okay?' The inventor inquired with concern.

'I am better, thank you.'

'Okay then Snowflake, let's go back home!'

~

Tony grimaced when another loud crash disturbed his train of thoughts. He tried to concentrate on updating Jarvis' code, but the workers were so loud he just couldn't. He sipped his cold coffee contemplating what to do. The AI was still offline so he couldn't just leave the men here and go do something else, the only option was to stay and keep an eye on things himself.

Not being able to relay on Jarvis to safeguard his secrets for the first time in a long while was very disconcerting, but the inventor knew there was no way around it until he finally finished coding. Tony sighed dejectedly wishing for Loki to be here to provide a much more enjoyable distraction, but he was certain that the god would not set a foot in the workshop until the workmen were gone.

A knock on the glass free doorframe gained his attention and Tony glanced towards the destroyed entryway to see who came to visit him. Natasha stood by the bent out of shape frame and waited for him to give her permission to enter. Everybody knew that the workshop was Stark's sanctuary and that not everyone could enter it. Tony beckoned for her to come inside and the spy slowly made her way between devastated workbenches, some of them even marred with bullet holes. She

stopped next to his chair and curiously glanced around.

'I love what you've done to this place,' Natasha greeted, one corner of her mouth lifting slightly.

'Yeah well, that's the only place Pepper let me decorate all on my own. Any news?'

The redhead shook her head.

'The underlings we managed to capture thanks to Loki know nothing. They had been contracted by, as they claim, a *vague* organization and promised a handsome paycheck for delivering the cargo. The operation was all on a need to know basis. The one giving orders was apparently the woman Loki spoke of,' Natasha explained, leaning cautiously on the closest worktable.

'So this wasn't even Hydra? How'd they know when to attack?'

*Was someone else at play? Someone they couldn't put a name to? And why were they after Jarvis' motherboards? Or maybe it was only one of their goals?* Tony couldn't tell and it scared him.

'I need to talk to Fury. He has to place a detail on Pepper.' If something would happen to her again he wouldn't be able to live with it.

'You can't. I tried contacting him, but the call doesn't come through, it goes straight to voicemail.'

'You're telling me he's on vacation?' Tony growled, where was the damn pirate when one needed him?

Natasha just shrugged.

'Jarvis,' the engineer called, but only the sound of crushing concrete answered him. It took Tony a moment to remember that the AI was offline.

'Damn!' Stark took out his phone and dialed quickly. After a second the line clicked. 'Hi Steve, do you want to babysit for a few hours? I have some work to do.'

~

The day was cold, but mostly cloudless and the late morning sun shone brightly, trying to warm the crispy air even just a little. At this altitude the cold winter winds were howling like a pack of dire wolves in pursuit of a pray, and when Thor stepped out onto the roof of the Avengers Tower straight from a warm corridor an unpleasant shiver ran over his skin. He much more liked New York in summer than now. Although the snow just barely started falling earlier that morning, it managed to cover the metropolis under a thin white coat.

The thunderer's eyes focused on a silhouette sitting on the cold concrete floor not far from the entrance and he approached his brother slowly, not wanting to disturb him just yet. He was positive that Loki would sense his presence soon. In the meantime Thor had an opportunity to take a good look at his younger, wayward sibling. Surprisingly Loki looked better, way better than the thunder god hoped he would when he spirited him away from Asgard. At first he wasn't sure if bringing Loki to people who helped defeating him was a good idea, but he couldn't just take him to Jane. Loki's hateful words about her still rang in his ears, and after the torture he went through, Thor wasn't sure if his brother's mind was wholly intact. And he was positive that asking Director Fury for help was out of the question. He would probably applaud the All-Father for his choice of punishment and gladly deal his own. No, the only place Loki would be safe was the Avengers Tower. And he wasn't wrong about his mortal friends' hearts. Even if they were apprehensive at the beginning about the idea of Loki living here, in the end they accepted his presence, for what



Thor was infinitely grateful.

Tony Stark especially was plenty helpful in aiding the younger god, without him Thor suspected things might have ended very differently. Thanks to the mad inventor his brother could heal not only the flesh wounds, but also those of heart. The thunderer never talked with Stark about it, but he had a feeling that the normal *'you break my brother's heart, I break your skull'* wasn't really necessary, seeing how protective Tony got over Loki. It warmed Thor's heart to know that there was someone other than himself and their mother that cared about Loki so strongly, and that the feeling was mutual.

At first it surprised Thor watching Loki open his heart to someone and a mortal to boot, and he had to admit to himself it made him jealous deep in his heart that it was Tony and not him that managed to thwart the ice cage around the trickster's heart. Yet maybe it was better like that, because Thor didn't understand Loki like Tony did, and even if he loved him with his whole heart it wasn't the same kind of love the mortal bestowed upon him.

In the end Thor was glad for them and proud that he had a hand in bringing them together. Now the only concern that remained was to restore Loki's sight. That was beyond anything the thunderer could do, but he was positive that his younger brother given time would figure that out.

'If you will stare for a minute longer I think my hair is going to catch on fire.' Loki suddenly spoke not bothering to even move. Thor laughed breathing in a mouthful of cold air in the process.

'I remember you once managed to accomplish this fit, setting that poor servant's hair aflame,' the older god stepped closer and sat next to his brother.

'He deserved that,' Loki mumbled.

'I am sure he did brother!' Thor patted Loki on the thigh heartily. He then unraveled a blanket he brought with himself and tossed it over the trickster's shoulders and his own.

'What brings you here?' The raven-haired god asked curiously shifting closer so Thor could wrap the blanket more snugly around them.

'Do I need a reason to be in your presence?' The blond asked seriously. Loki just shook his head.

'Yet in recent years you had to find one to visit me and only when you needed something.'

Thor grunted awkwardly.

'That might be true. We became estranged and I do not even know when that happened. I regret many deeds Loki that led us to what we have now. I might have been oblivious to many things concerning you, but you have to admit you never made it easy for me to notice.' Thor cast his gaze over the railing and towards the city where millions of people went over their days.

'Fair enough,' the younger agreed surprisingly without a fuss.

'I wish... I wish Loki that we could mend the bond that had been broken. In our youth we were almost inseparable! We could still have that!'

The trickster just laughed mirthlessly.

'I am not the same spoiled princeling as I once was and neither are you. We have both seen too much, too many horrors and suffering to be left pure, unscarred. We could never have what we once had,' Loki said standing up, the blanket pooling at his feet. 'We are not even brothers.' He said

it so softly that Thor barely managed to catch it over the howling of the wind.

Loki stepped closer to the edge of the roof and Thor watched as his clear, porcelain skin slowly became marred with raised lines as the blue swallowed the ivory and dulled gray-green turned to brown. He also stood up, blanket on his shoulders, its corners whipping around his knees. Loki turned towards him and his eyes were sad.

'This is the real me, Asgard's hated enemy, a runt from a savage land, an *ergi* sorcerer, a trickster, Loki.'

'A prince of Asgard still,' the thunderer stepped closer and put his warm palms on Loki's shoulders. He could feel the cold seeping through the fabric, but he ignored it. 'And the brother of Thor. Always Loki for as long as I live.'

'Thor...'

Experimentally the blond caressed Loki's cheekbone with his thumb. It stung, but it did not burn and the flesh under his hand turned pale again. Thor smiled at his brother and kissed his furrowed brow. 'Always brother.'

'You oaf,' Loki huffed smiling back. He sneaked a still blue hand under Thor's shirt and pressed it firmly to his back for a fraction of a second, not long enough to hurt, but sufficient to transfer the cold. The thunderer yelped startled and Loki just laughed.

'Go inside before you freeze out here.'

'That was a vicious move brother.'

'I know,' the trickster grinned, 'now shoo, I was trying to meditate.'

Thor bend down to pick up the blanket that he let go after Loki's surprise attack and wrapped it over the younger god's lithe frame.

'I do not need it, I do not feel cold out here,' Loki said.

'Me neither, it is warm inside,' Thor grinned and left confused Loki alone again. The trickster just shrugged and once again sat on the ground going over all the necessary exercises required to still his mind, blanket snugly wrapped around his shoulders.

~

Tony worked furiously for the last five hours. He managed to finish coding Jarvis and then proceeded to hack S.H.I.E.L.D. It took him another hour to go through a ton of documents before he finally stumbled on the one he was looking for. Fury was apparently on some deep cover mission and the next in charge was... Maria Hill. The inventor grimaced, he never particularly liked her, but he also didn't like Fury so it make little difference.

'Make the call J.'

'*Right away sir.*' It was good to finally hear his AI's perfect British accent again.

He waited over a minute before the conference call connected and Maria's annoyed face was displayed on the big screen in front of him.

'What do you want Stark?' She asked instead of a greeting.

'Information and a unit in front of Pepper's apartment keeping a 24/7 watch over her until we figure out who was behind the attack on my property.'

Agent Hill lifted a brow.

'Why should we help you if you refuse to help us?'

'I constantly help you,' Stark growled, 'or maybe you want me to call Fury? I bet he would be delighted to hear my voice, speaking all that Bulgarian all the time must be really tiring for him.'

Maria sighed defeated.

'I'm listening.'

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 19

Tony had holed himself in the workshop working furiously on his old reactor, trying to fix the core so that it wouldn't poison him, but to no avail. He knew it wouldn't be a walk in the park, he ran all those tests before, searching for the right element, but he thought that few years later maybe some new ideas would spring to life in his brain. Sadly, technically the problem has been solved, the solution was now resting next to his heart and he had no other ideas what to do with the palladium core, except maybe throw it away.

The idea of exchanging the reactor came to his mind not long after Loki's confession about his nightmares. It must have been bad if the god was so worried about it.

At first when he found Loki among the broken glass table in his suite the inventor thought the nightmares to be a reaction to recent torture, PTSD, but Loki now explained to him that it might not be the case, that it was the Tesseract playing tricks with his mind, weakening him so that he could become a tool again. The most frightening part was that the god wasn't aware of that for a long time slowly succumbing to the cube's will.

It was partially thanks to Tony that he got worse. Being close to the arc reactor and its energy very similar to that of the cosmic cube poisoned Loki's magic - the god explained. So as far as Tony was concerned there was only one option available to them, even if it wasn't permanent or the best one. The new arc reactor had to go. The thing is that the older model wasn't any better.

Tony sighed stretching in the chair, his vertebrae popping one after another. The starkium core was poisoning Loki and the palladium core would poison him. There were only two solutions and they both sucked. One: he would exchange the core and it would slowly kill him, at the same time sparring Loki the agony. It would give them time to work on the god's sigils. And two: he could distance himself from the deity, maybe go to Malibu and then what, conference call Loki every day? What about the Avengers? That was the *stupid as fuck* solution.

Quickly crossing the vast workshop Tony found himself staring at a wall, empty except of an Iron man painting, the faceplate gazing at him mockingly. He placed his right palm flat on the cool surface and waited. The mechanism was set to activate after a whole minute to further disguise it.

When the allotted time ended the surface under his palm glowed faintly green and a vault opened soundlessly granting him access to its treasures. Three arc reactors lay displayed on a glass shelf, his first made with Yinsen's help, the second, the improved design also with the palladium core, and a third, a spare one with starkium inside. Tony stared at them for some time, mind adrift, then he grabbed the one he needed. The vault was shielded with thick walls of concrete and very specific and expensive metal alloys so that no one could discover it via energy signature scans, so Tony was confident that the reactor's energy wouldn't reach Loki.

It was weird holding the old reactor again. A time bomb that could potentially kill him, but he just

couldn't sit idle and watch Loki descend into madness. He'd rather do this than nothing.

Closing the vault he stepped away just in time to see the god enter the workshop. Tony stilled like a deer in the headlights of a car.

'Anthony?' Loki called strutting between workbenches loaded with bits and pieces from various unfinished projects the inventor discarded or got bored with.

Stark cursed silently. Why now?

He observed as the god came closer wearing only a pair of gray sweat pants, his deliciously chiseled chest and abs on full display. He was caught in the act, the arc reactor in hand almost burning his fingers with guilt.

'What are you doing?' Loki stopped in front of him, brows furrowed, his attention on the faulty reactor.

The engineer could feel drops of sweat rolling down his spine. Busted.

'Uh,' he managed to grunt out before the god took out the old arc reactor from his hand.

'This is the one that poisoned you?' Loki more stated than asked.

Tony laughed nervously. 'You can tell?'

'Yes, this one feels foul to just be near it, it radiates disease. And you were planning to put it back into your chest.' The god deadpanned, his voice flat, void of any emotions.

Well Tony it was nice knowing you, apparently that plan was doomed from the beginning. Stark hoped that the god wouldn't be able to tell the difference, but he underestimated him.

'No I just...'

'Jarvis told me.'

*The traitor!* Tony wanted to shout.

'Look it was supposed to be only a temporary solution, so we could have more time to find a way to help you,' the billionaire explained weakly.

'So you thought that sparing me a few nightmare would justify using this... This abomination?'

'Hey! It is a work of art and pure science! Maybe not designed to be compatible with human body, but a great invention nonetheless!'

Loki growled, literary growled like a damn animal and crushed the arc reactor with his bare fingers, bits of the casing falling to the ground, ruined.

'What the...!'

'I do not need your sacrifice, you have suffered enough because of me. Your mortal body is frail and would succumb to the illness much faster than mine.'

'Loki.'

'No! You said yourself that I should not have kept from you that my healing magic brought me pain, yet now you try to do exactly the same thing. And it would be for nothing!' The god finally



lost it and started shouting. "The tainted *Seiðr* would still course within my veins! You would only harm yourself and for what?!"

Loki threw the destroyed device to the floor with such force that it shattered into tiny pieces. He was visibly shaking with rage and Tony wasn't sure if anything he said now would reach the enraged god. He fucked up. In his mind the plan had made perfect sense. He recalled how he felt when he discovered Loki's secret - devastated and useless. It wasn't his intention to make Loki feel the same, he just wanted to help.

'It will take time before it starts crossing into my blood, time you need!'

'No! I would not take it, not if it would bring you harm. How is that any different from what I did?! From what you made me promise to never do again!' Loki banged his fist on the nearest worktable denting its surface.

'But you don't have other options!' Now they were both shouting. 'You are stuck with those sigils if you like it or not! Unless you have a master plan I don't know about! As I recall the last time I had to wake you up from a nightmare you almost fucking suffocated! And you tell me it is nothing?! You are getting weak Loki and I..' he wasn't given the chance to finish that sentence because Loki's hand shot out and wrapped itself around the billionaire's throat successfully cutting off his oxygen supply.

'Never,' the god growled and Tony was immediately reminded how the same god threw him from a window a few stories above the one they were currently at, 'assume that I am weak Stark. I am a god and even in this pitiful state I could kill you with a flick of a wrist.'

Black spots began to appear at the edges of Tony's vision and the inventor started to trash in the god's death grip.

'Loki!' he choked out digging his fingernails into the trickster's hand.

As if thunder-struck the god released him and Tony's oxygen deprived body slumped to the ground with a loud thud. Loki took a step back then another, his face stricken with anguish. Breathing rapidly he stood there dumbfounded for a moment and then he dashed to the exit, the only indication of him even being there the gust of arctic air slowly dissipating in the workshop's precisely controlled temperature.

'Fuck...' Tony managed to croak out before the darkness dragged him over the edge of unconsciousness.

~

'Tony, Tony!' a slap to his cheek successfully managed to ruse him from the dreamless void he drifted in just moments ago. He felt exhausted, it reminded him of this one time when he spend almost a week working nonstop on a project running only on coffee and maybe three hours of sleep. It was awful. A splitting headache raged within his skull and bile threatened to make its way up his throat any moment.

'What...' he slurred trying to right himself. Why was he on the floor again?

'Tony talk to me,' a voice commanded from above. In the next instant a bright light assaulted his eyes.

'Jesus!' he breathed batting it away.

His throat hurt... Oh fuck!

Tony tried to stand up, but his legs buckled under him.

'Steady!' Bruce said guiding him gently to the floor again. 'Tony what happened?'

'Where is Loki?' the engineer grunted massaging his sore throat.

'He's with Natasha...' the doctor started, then he noticed the destroyed arc reactor and he went pale, a few green veins popping out on his temples.

Stark followed his gaze and swore.

'Nononono Bruce, it is not what it looks like! Calm down!'

'Then what is it?' Steve asked standing behind the scientist with arms crossed over his chest.

Tony coughed trying once again to stand up.

'Can I get some water and maybe a chair? The floor's not exactly comfortable.'

They sat him up on Loki's sofa and Bruce once again checked his pulse and corneal reactions.

'Speak,' Steve ordered sitting at the edge of the armrest.

'It was my fault...'

'You destroyed your arc reactor and strangled yourself?'

'No captain smartass, but I pissed Loki off.'

'What did you do?' Bruce asked, he managed to calm himself somewhat, enough not to hulk out, but the anger was still there, just outside of his immediate reach. The darkening bruises on Tony's throat weren't helping either.

'Uh can I see Loki now? I need to talk to him.'

'Tony.'

'Um I might have wanted to change this arc reactor for an older version?' Stark admitted unable to meet his friends' eyes. Yeah it was a stupid plan.

'And that pissed Loki off?' Steve asked perplexed. 'Why?'

'Because Stark's a moron.' Natasha stated in a matter of fact tone strolling in nonchalantly as if she owned this place. 'You really are stupid for a genius.'

'Gee thanks,' Tony muttered gulping down another glass of water.

'I still don't understand.'

'You see Steve I was once working undercover in Stark Industries as Tony's personal assistant. My mission was to evaluate if he was the right kind of person for the Avengers Initiative.' The spy tooted looking at Stark. 'He wasn't. At the time Tony was dying, but no one knew except him, because he was too stubborn and self-destructive to ask for help.'

'What? But how?' The Captain looked at Tony; how could someone be dying and then not dying.

Was there some kind of medical invention he wasn't aware off?

'You see, the arc reactor, the one I assume is now in pieces on the floor,' she gestured towards the twisted, sad metal shell lying forlornly on the cold concrete, 'it was faulty. The element used to power it bleed into Tony's bloodstream effectively poisoning him. When Fury finally managed to reach you the toxicity level was what? 80%?' Natasha asked Stark, but he looked away.

'But why would you want to change it back?' Bruce asked, 'Is there something wrong with this one?' His hand hovered above Tony's chest, as if he wanted to touch the casing, but didn't dare.

'As I understood it, because mind you Loki wasn't very forthcoming, it somehow interferes with his bindings. I don't know how exactly.' Natasha then looked at Tony as if waiting for the inventor to elaborate on that matter.

'The reactor's energy is similar to the Tesseract's,' Tony mumbled, 'it makes him sick.'

He tried to stand up again, but Bruce wouldn't let him.

'And the bruises?' the doctor asked taking hold of Tony's chin to angle it away so he could take a better look at his throat. They were dark already, so the force behind the hand that strangled him wasn't just for show. 'Jarvis ratted me out.'

*'It was for your own good sir.'* The AI spoke for the first time.

'And Loki came just as I was about to change them. We had a different view on the matter... It's nothing really. I had worse.' the inventor batted Bruce's hand away and leaned forward towards Natasha.

'How is he?'

'Shaken. He came running for Bruce and gave us a good scare insisting that your life was in danger. I think it was the first time I saw him fear something, or for someone,' the spy looked smugly at Tony and he cringed. 'I left him with Thor in the movie room.'

'I should talk to him,' Tony sighed standing up without further obstructions.

~

They've entered the room slowly because Tony was still a little dizzy and the super nanny trio came as a backup in case Tony said something stupid again and Loki wanted to finish the job of strangling him to death.

The brothers sat on the enormous sofa in the center, Loki pressed tightly to Thor's side, the older god murmuring something to him, too quiet for the humans to hear. Stark hesitated in the entry way, suddenly his mind was empty of anything useful to say, because if it came to that again he would do exactly the same thing if it meant saving Loki.

They stood like that for a moment until Natasha lost her patience and pushed him towards the sitting pair. Stark wobbled on his feet and sent a vicious glare her way, but it was too late now, the two gods noticed him, and so he couldn't back away anymore.

'Uh babe, can we...'

'Go away.'

Thor looked at him with sympathy, probably having experience in being treated that way, his eyes trying to convey a message and encourage Tony to try again. Loki's face was turned away so the inventor had a hard time reading it. He stepped closer and tried again.

'Loki can we talk?'

'There is nothing to talk about,' the younger god barked shifting on the sofa like he was about to dash again. Tony looked at Thor, but the thunderer only shrugged.

'I will leave you alone,' he said disentangling himself from his brother. He patted Tony on the shoulder on his way out. When they were left alone the billionaire sighed and sat next to Loki on the huge leather sofa.

'I am not sorry,' he said, 'if I had to do it again I would.'

The god spun towards him, face twisted in rage, but before he managed to snarl anything at Tony, the inventor continued.

'But! I understand that it hurt you and trust me I don't want to hurt you. *Ever*. It's just...' he took Loki's hands in his. 'It's just really hard to sometimes look at you like this, hurt and broken. I would like to... I really would like to help you, anyway I can and that, that was the only way I knew. It wasn't to spite you, or enrage you, I just wanted for you to feel better.' Tony massaged the trickster's cold hands and waited patiently as the silence stretched. Finally Loki responded twisting his hands away and reaching for Tony's throat, fingers lightly grazing the inflamed flesh.

'I hurt you,' he whispered as his hands slid up to caress his lover's face.

'It's nothing,' Tony whispered back, his eyes fluttering shut at the gentle touch. He hoped that there would never come a time when they could no longer mend the broken parts of their hearts, because they were both plenty broken and they needed someone to help put the shattered fragments in order.

'Oh but it is.'

'You could always make it up to me.' Tony peered through his lashes at the god, a corner of his mouth lifting up, the innuendo not very subtle.

'You are incorrigible!' Loki murmured exasperated as his thumb traced over his lover's lower lip.

'Is that a yes? If so let's relocate to a more secure location to not traumatize the kids.' He swiftly pulled Loki up to his feet to search for better accommodation, the mood once again lifted.

~

'Oh shit, oh shit. Fuck!' Tony swore against Loki's collarbone. His breath came out shallow and labored, eyes shut tight and mouth agape. Splayed on his back, knees spread wide to accommodate a certain pale, black-haired deity Tony could barely breathe from the onslaught of sensations. Loki was working him open, two fingers in, diligently pistoning them in and out, from time to time brushing against the inventor's prostate. One of those teasing caresses made the billionaire sank his teeth into the junction of Loki's shoulder and neck to prevent himself from begging. A full body shudder went over his spine as he involuntarily arched from the bed screaming loudly the god's name, long stripes of come coloring both of their bodies. He then collapsed lifeless onto the damp sheets, exhausted from the mind-blowing orgasm. Loki chuckled somewhere above him.

'You should not have challenged me love.' A lithe finger traced his abs smearing some come

further up his abdomen. Stark opened one eye to look at his smirking lover.

'Admittedly I haven't had sex with a guy in over twenty years.'

'Excuses, excuses.' Teased the god, one hand buried in Tony's hair, the other drawing small circles on the inventor's stomach.

In retaliation Stark reached out and grabbed Loki's straining erection and stroked it in a succession of short, fast tugs making the god hiss in response pressing his forehead to Tony's chest.

'Are we going to do something about this or is it just for show?' He slowed down to a languid pace gathering some precome on his thumb and smeared it over the head of Loki's cock. The god recovered from the overstimulation Tony served him and started sucking and pinching the engineer's nipples, sometimes using his teeth to tug at the hardened nub.

'You need a moment,' Loki said kissing the reddened pebble he assaulted just a second ago.

'Nope, I'm good to go! Come on, don't make me wait!'

Tony tugged Loki up so the god was splayed over him and kissed those sinful lips hard, biting and sucking. Loki growled against him, the sound coming out feral and possessive. Stark hooked his legs over the god's ass and thrust his hips up searching blissful friction. The immortal shuddered and gasped abandoning his lover's kiss-swollen lips.

'Fuck me already,' Tony panted grounding his hips against Loki's one more time to emphasize his point.

'Do it yourself,' the trickster smirked positioning himself more comfortably between Tony's legs.

'You diva,' Stark reached out again and grabbed the god's cock, squeezed once and guided it to his entrance. Loki's breath fanned over his mouth.

'So hot,' he panted kissing Tony's brow while slowly pressing deeper. The billionaire's mouth fell agape as he focused on the sensation of being stretched wide open. Loki certainly was endowed like a god and accommodating that girth required caution and patience from both of them. When he finally bottomed out they were both panting hard, sweat pearling on Loki's brow and curling his hair even more. He nuzzled his nose against Tony's, their breaths mingling in the scant millimeters between their lips and waited for his lover to give him permission to move. Stark's hands encircled the god's neck as his fingers buried in the long black tresses and they were kissing again tongues tasting each other, teasing and exploring, sliding against one another in a vicious dance. After a moment Tony finally nodded and Loki slowly withdrew almost entirely just to push right back in. The inventor couldn't suppress a scream when Loki's cock brushed over his sweet spot.

'Oh my fucking god... Again!' Tony breathed, his voice rough like sand paper. The god chuckled and bit his earlobe sucking at it hard, his movement now jarring Tony's prostate again and again. The engineer cursed and writhed and groaned under him, his body overstimulated and on the verge.

'Anthony, my Anthony.' Loki whispered sweetly carding through Tony's sweat-slicked hair while his hips slowed to a languid pace, giving his lover a moment to take in a proper breath.

'Don't stop,' Tony begged breathless, his hands relocating from Loki's shoulders, searching fingers gliding over firm plains of the god's back and lower still to squeeze his bottom to urge the deity to move faster.

The trickster kissed his beautifully flushed cheek, smirking as he oh so very slowly withdrew and



stopped again.

'Stop playing, you tease!' Tony growled sneaking two fingers between the god's buttocks and pressing in. Loki gasped and his hips bucked. Now the inventor smirked and pushed even deeper scissoring the deity open. The trickster shuddered, his head flying back exposing the perfect, ivory throat. He came moaning obscenely against Tony's ear after merely a few moments. The billionaire pleased with himself sucked hard on the offered pale flesh slowly working Loki over his orgasm alternately scissoring and hooking his fingers while the god fucked him, his hips thrusting erratically.

'Trickery,' Loki purred half collapsing on top of the inventor perfectly fucked out and sated. He slowly licked a trail over Tony's chest leaving a quick kiss on the reactor's casing, then sucked a mark on the sensitive skin of his underbelly making Tony squirm and grunt.

'Your favorite weapon of choice.'

'Indeed,' the god chuckled nuzzling Tony's straining cock. He licked at the head and teased the slit with the tip of his tongue. His right hand found Tony's asshole and the trickster push in three fingers, his thumb caressing his lover's perineum. Stark cursed viciously, hips bucking up, cock going deep into Loki's throat, and the god hollowed his cheeks and sucked hard reducing Tony to a mewling, writhing mess. It took only a few thrusts for the inventor to lose himself in the heat of Loki's mouth and he was coming, ass clenching around the god's skilled fingers.

After swallowing the whole load the trickster wiped his lips and sucked one last hickey on Tony's inner thigh, then slowly retreated wanting to stand up, but Stark's hand shot out gripping his wrist and stopped him.

'Stay.'

'I should not,' the god shook his head sadly.

'Please stay,' the billionaire pleaded. Sighing Loki flopped back down next to Tony, their bodies fitting perfectly together. Stark brushed a few sweaty strands from the god's forehead and kissed the tip of his nose.

'I like to have you close when I fall asleep.'

Loki lightly kissed his lover's bruised throat and rested his head on Tony's shoulder sneaking a hand around his warm body so he could gather him closer, the steady beat of the inventor's heart right next to his ear; a beautiful sound and one he would protect above all costs.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 20

The time stopped. It was literally standing still as far as Tony was concerned. In the last ten minutes it seemed like the clock's hands moved only mere millimeters, yet it felt like eternity. He took his eyes from the clearly broken device and settled his gaze on Pepper.

'Can I go now?' He whined bored out of his wits. The redhead crossed her arms as her mouth twisted with disapproval.

'There is still much to be done Tony.'

'You're the CEO; shouldn't your signature bear more value than mine?' The engineer looked with despair at the huge stack of papers still waiting for his approval. Signing those was going to take him a whole afternoon.

'Those are your patents Tony, I can't sign them,' Pepper sighed exasperated. It was ridiculous how hard it was sometimes to make Tony cooperate. When not working on some project of his, the inventor's attention span was shorter than that of a child's. He got bored really easily too.

'I pushed some of those back deliberately so you wouldn't have to come here especially just to sign them, but it's long overdue and we can't wait any longer. Just do this quickly and then you'll be free for a couple of weeks from paperwork.'

Tony bit at the tip of the pen. There wasn't a *quick* way. He had to read them all to be sure everything was included and phrased correctly. It's not that he didn't believe in Pepper's abilities, but sometimes the technical jargon had to be very specific.

'Please don't do that, it's my favorite fountain pen,' Pepper sighed again. 'You know what,' she took the pen out of his hand, 'let's take a break, drink some coffee and we'll discuss the trip arrangement.'

Stark grimaced.

### **The trip.**

It was even worse than signing papers and almost as bad as board meetings. They were departing for London two weeks from now to finalize this big contract. First arc reactor power plant in Europe, a huge deal - Pepper said, so Tony couldn't talk his way out of it.

It wouldn't have been such a problem; Tony generally didn't mind traveling, if not for the small matter of not being able to take Loki with him. For starters he didn't own a passport; apparently they didn't give out any intergalactic ones. Secondly Fury would flip if he heard that Tony wanted

to spirit the god away from the States. As long as they were close at hand and under S.H.I.E.L.D.'s radar the pirate was supposedly content to let them be. How gracious of him. Nevertheless Tony suspected that there were agents watching the Avengers Tower 24/7 anyway. Not to mention Clint and Natasha.

Admittedly the inventor didn't interact much with them except a few awkward movie nights. He just generally preferred to stay in his own sand box.

After the attack on his tower the billionaire noticed a few less hostile glances were thrown towards his lover. Loki even visited the common floor a number of times after to Thor's utmost delight. Tony hoped that given time he would be welcomed amongst them if not entirely trusted.

Today for example he was with Bruce. They probably discussed alien flora and fauna and bonded over guts of some poor specimen. Loki was a very intelligent guy (what by the way turned Tony on so much) and the inventor was positive he would find a common language with his science bro.

'Tony, are you listening?' Pepper asked exasperated.

'Huh? Yeah, yeah the trip.'

A knock on the door announced the arrival of his coffee and as Pepper's assistant entered a heavenly aroma filled the office. Tony sighed with delight and waited for the assistant to place the cup on the desk. She should know by now that Tony didn't like being handed things.

'I'll leave all the preparations to you, as usual. Just send Jarvis the schedule.' He waved dismissively sitting again in front of the stack of documents. 'Let's get this over with, I need to go back to my digging.'

'Tony it has been almost three months.' Pepper looked at him with worry.

Since New Year's Tony has been trying to dig up any information that would point him in the right direction towards answers, but for now he's only been going in a loop. He couldn't find ANYTHING connecting the attack to Hydra, or anyone for the matter. The soldiers that were in S.H.I.E.L.D.'s custody got mysteriously sent away not long after their capture and no one knew where to. He downloaded the recordings of their interrogation before they vanished too, but just as Natasha said, they apparently knew nothing and when Tony asked if he could question them himself Fury (who miraculously appeared back in D.C.) refused, claiming to have right people for this job.

And so Tony was left in the dark. The repairs to the outer wall were finished months ago, his skin got healed with Loki's help, but he still knew nothing.

*Why did they attack him?*

*Why target Jarvis specifically?*

*How did they know where to look?*

It was infuriating and Tony could do nothing to change that.

'I know Pep, but I just can't let it go! There has to be a trace I can follow!'

'Tony...' Pepper took the page Stark just signed and tucked it away with the others. 'You will make yourself sick; it has become an unhealthy obsession.'

'They struck at my home! Almost destroyed Jarvis and hurt Loki and I can't find any evidence that this even happened! You saw yourself what the press wrote! *'A dangerous experiment gone wrong! A massive explosion in Avengers Tower!'* That's bullshit.' The engineer stood up and started pacing around the desk.

'What if they'll strike again, but be better prepared this time and I'll be somewhere far away? What if next time they'll target you or Rhodey? I need to know Pepper, I need to be able to protect you!'

'Oh Tony,' the redhead went to him and hugged him with all her strength. The inventor rested his head on her shoulder and sniffed.

'I can't lose any of you, you are my family.'

'We will be alright,' Pepper whispered. She gently stroked through his unruly hair waiting for the inventor to calm down. 'Go home, but take those with you, I need them signed by Friday.'

'You are the best,' Tony stepped back and flashed a weak smile. He looked exhausted, she noticed. Maybe it was time to talk to Loki, he appeared to have a sway over the genius that no other could rival recently, even her.

When he left, Pepper took out her StarkPhone.

'Jarvis, please relay a message for me.'

~

'Thank you for agreeing to meet up with me,' Pepper said stepping into the lounge. Tony was in the workshop actively avoiding the stack of paperwork left on the coffee table. It was the perfect opportunity to talk to Loki.

'It is a pleasure, Miss Pots.' The god stood up gracefully.

'Please call me Pepper,' the redhead smiled. She never actually expected she would come to like the immortal. From the tales after the New York Incident she gathered he was a crazed, bend on world domination tyrant, but the person before her now was a composed and quiet individual, cunning and calculating, definitely dangerous (she heard how he managed to incapacitate the attackers even handicapped as he is now), but there was no sign of insanity in his features. And the fact that he aided Tony a number of times helped. 'Please, let's sit, I have something I would like to discuss with you.'

'As you wish,' Loki inclined his head towards her. 'What troubles you Pepper?'

'Tony, of course, it is always him,' she sighed.

'A troublesome creature indeed,' the god chuckled, but his mirth was short lived. 'Did something happen?'

'No, well not yet I think. It's just that he became obsessed with finding who attacked you and Jarvis, and why. I know he always does what he wants and believe me, no one can force Tony Stark to do anything if he doesn't want to. I just worry that he will make himself sick trying to discover the truth above all costs.' She inhaled deeply trying to calm herself, worrying about Tony was always so exhausting

Loki recalled his and the inventor's last fight. It was true, when he set his mind on an idea there was no way of stopping Stark, he would do anything to protect those dear to him even when the

price to pay would turn out to be extremely high. The god grimaced, he wasn't aware of this new (or maybe not so new) obsession of his lover. Undoubtedly they didn't spend every waking hour together, but Loki cursed himself for not noticing any changes in Stark behavior. There was still a lot for him to learn about his lover.

'Could you perhaps, I don't know, talking won't probably achieve much, but distract him somehow? So he wouldn't spend every available moment on this search? He won't listen to me.' Pepper almost pleaded with a hint of desperation in her voice.

'I will see what I can do,' Loki hesitated for a moment considering his options, there was a limited number of things he could do, but he would think up something. 'Thank you for trusting me with this,' he said sincerely bowing his head slightly.

'Let's just hope he will listen to you,' Pepper sighed once again.

*'Miss Pots,' Jarvis chimed in, 'you have a meeting in 27 minutes.'*

'Thank you Jarvis,' Pepper stood up. 'Thanks for listening, I swear this man is sometimes so hard to handle I am amazed I still have any sanity left.'

The god smiled wide also standing up. 'He is a handful,' Loki agreed.

'Oh yes! Bye!' Pepper entered the elevator and left Loki alone to plot.

~

'Where are we going?' Loki asked exasperated. He was being led to an unknown place by overly excited Stark and the engineer wouldn't tell him their destination. It actually didn't take much to persuade Tony to leave the tower even if just for one day. The god just had to mention that he felt like suffocating, always between the same walls and the gears inside the inventor's head immediately started working.

'We're almost there!' Tony laughed, his hold firm on the god's hand.

It was a sunny late March morning. The still not exactly warm breeze ruffled Loki's long hair bringing with itself a fresh scent of vegetation springing to life. The god wasn't overly familiar with midgardian flora, but he noticed the air in this area was decidedly cleaner than on the busy streets of Manhattan. And there were birds here, lots of birds and not just pigeons with their gurgling voices, but other, their songs sweet and cheerful. It reminded him somewhat of Asgard's forests, or even Altheim's great tundra where he and Thor went hunting sometimes. Times long past, but more than enough of those memories he reminisced fondly, especially those when he was travelling with Thor alone, the idiots three busy elsewhere. They could stalk a pray for days, track its path through the lush greenery of Altheim's vast forests, camp right under the stars and even wake up before dusk to watch the sun rise. Later the hunts became more of a display of physical proves than cunning and Loki was left behind, his tricks and clever traps uncalled for. So he stopped going, except when his presence was needed as a prince of Asgard on some sort of social or diplomatic event. He kept the earlier days as fond memories and moved on to study spells and history of the Nine Realms and beyond.

'Okay we're here,' Tony smiled, slightly out of breath. 'It kinda sucks that you can't see this place, but when we'll find a way to restore your eyesight I'll just bring you here again.'

'We are in a botanical garden in Bronx. I had to pay a shitload of money, but it will be closed to public for a couple of hours so we can enjoy our picnic in peace. Come.'



The inventor tugged on Loki's hand and guided him down to sit on a previously prepared blanket. All around them the woods were teeming with life. The god let himself carefully extend the radius of his spell to take in all the details surrounding them. There were rodents not far scurrying through the last year leaves, gathering nuts and acorns. A fox stopped and stared at them for one moment and then vanished under the shrubbery.

Being trapped for such a long time first with the Chitauri, then in the dungeons of Asgard and finally in Tony's tower Loki cherished every moment outside. The feeling of being under the canopy of fresh leaves, without any royal responsibilities and just free. Well mostly free, but he would appreciate what he was given. He could be happy and it was all thanks to this ridiculous mortal, Tony Stark - his lover. The notion of them being something more than enemies was once so farfetched for Loki that he was still amazed and a little perplexed to how this came to be.

'Here,' Tony put a cool flute of champagne in his hand to clink it with his own. 'A toast to peace and quiet away from noisy paparazzi!' He laughed while settling down next to the god. Loki took a sip of the beverage and it tasted exquisite, the sparkling bubbles a pleasant sensation on his tongue.

'I'm not really a nature kind of guy, but it feels nice,' the billionaire stretched out and put his head on Loki's lap sighing contently. The trickster reflexively entwined his fingers in the other's hair.

'Aaand you're not saying anything. You don't like it?'

'I do. It is a nice change, I just wish I could see it properly. I am certain it must be beautiful.'

Tony was probably reading too deep into that simple statement, but he had a feeling that Loki wasn't necessarily talking about the scenery, maybe not entirely. The thought made Tony's heart skip a beat and pleasant warmth pooled in his chest. He nuzzled his cheek against the god's thigh.

'I'm working on that, we'll get your sight back.'

'I wish it were that simple.' Loki's fingers stilled for a moment in Tony's hair.

'What do you mean?'

'My lack of sight is directly connected to me regaining my magic. How do you see those sigils?' He asked suddenly.

'Uh they are a bunch of moving tentacles?' The inventor tried not knowing where this was going.

'Yes, to your untrained eye. In truth they are a cluster of runes, the body of a spell and if I was only able to read them I am positive I could break their hold on me,' the god explained resuming his massage of Tony's scalp.

'Okay I don't see it, but Thor wouldn't be able to read those?' He took hold of Loki's other arm and started tracing patterns between the black tattoos. He couldn't see any runes or anything even vaguely resembling alphabet, for him it was just weird black paint.

The god only shook his head.

'He also does not have the knowledge to do so. It would take a skilled sorcerer to be able to decipher those.'

Tony suddenly sat up.

'We have one here on Earth. Doctor Strange, he calls himself the Sorcerer Supreme. I could try to

contact him.'

Loki smiled and bend his neck to kiss the inventor.

'Alright, there is no harm in trying.'

'You betcha. Now are you hungry, because I brought a big ass basket full of goodies! Cap even made us some sandwiches!'

~

They spent a long time just eating and enjoying their closeness. The sun rose higher on the brilliant blue sky indicating that it was almost noon. At some point they both laid down on the soft blanket; Loki with his eyes closed, head next to the engineer's shoulder, humming some old asgardian tone, while Tony observed the fluffy white clouds slowly rolling on the horizon.

'Are you aware,' Loki started suddenly, 'that your arc reactor sings?'

'What?' Tony asked perplexed peering suspiciously at his chest.

'It does, I can hear it. It is a soft, yet strong tune, entirely different from the Tesseract's.'

'The cube also sings?' The inventor arched a brow.

'Yes, but when I had it in my possession it was angry and the melody was full of dissonance, chaotic. It resembled a chorus of myriad angry voices all singing in disharmony urging you to do its bidding, no matter the cost,' the god explained sitting up.

'Wow it must have sucked to listen to it.'

'I can still hear its echo,' Loki murmured.

'Well I can only feel as it vibrates with energy. At first it was fucking weird, but eventually I got used to it.' Stark just shrugged and picked up an apple for himself and another for the god from the mostly empty basket. 'Here, we should be going soon, so let's finish the fruits so we won't have to carry them back.'

Loki weighted the perfectly shaped apple in his hand. He wanted to ask Tony about a similar one, but wasn't sure if he would like the answer given.

'Anthony,' the god licked his lips, the apple tumbled between his hands, 'have you ever heard about the golden apples of Iðunn?'

'Golden apples? The ones that make you immortal?'

Loki shook his head. 'We are not immortal, not really, the apples only prolong our lives and make us stronger, more resilient.'

'Oh nice, what about them? You think one could help you?' Tony sat straighter, something in Loki's hesitancy made him a little nervous.

'No, I do not think so. But... Would you accept one if freely given?'

'What? Me? You want me to eat a golden apple and live forever?' Stark asked incredulous.

'You do not wish to?' Loki's face fell and he turned his head away.

'No, no. It's not that I don't want. It sounds awesome. It's just that we – mortals, as you so like to call us aren't designed to live for that long you know. We are born with the knowledge that in a couple of decades we won't be here anymore. Some don't even live that long. I am not sure I would like to... You know before I got this,' Tony tapped at the reactor, 'I always thought I would probably die from alcohol poisoning, heart attack, liver failure or things like that and probably quite young, but then when I actually almost died some things changed, I changed. Impending threat of death does that to you.'

Tony took Loki's hand in his and intertwined their fingers.

Did he want to live that long? And with Loki? What about the others, Pepper, Rodney and the Avengers? He would have to watch them die. From the whole group he always thought he would be the first to go, probably killed on some kind of mission. He just couldn't picture himself old with a failing body, or worse, failing mind. It was just... too scary to think about. Yet on the other hand he would have Loki. *Always*. And he could achieve so much more, not restricted by time. They could even travel to the other realms and maybe settle in one of them when being on Earth would prove too painful.

It was a hard choice, not to be taken lightly. Tony wasn't sure if he wouldn't go mad at some point from the long years. He sometimes felt so tired and just... just wanted for all the fighting to end.

The god stood up leaving the inventor's hand empty.

'I apologize. I did not intend for you to feel uncomfortable. You have absolutely no obligation to abide to my whims. I just thought...' the trickster bit his lower lip. 'It is nothing.'

'Loki I want to be with you for as long as I am able.' Tony also stood up and hugged the taller man from behind. 'Just the thought of thousands of years that I would still have before me is really scary.' The inventor planted a light kiss on Loki's exposed neck. 'Give me some time to think it through?'

'It was but an inquiry of mine. I have no means to acquire an apple now. Just a hypothetical question.' Loki sighed.

'I'm sorry,' Tony said turning the god in his embrace so he could face him.

'For what?'

'For making you sad.'

The god just shook his head.

'Foolish... mortal,' he sighed. 'We should get going, you said we didn't have much time left.'

'Yeah... Let me just pack all the stuff.'

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 21

'I've reached out to Strange,' Tony said between his second cup of coffee and a croissant.

They sat outside on the grand balcony – an extension of their floor. The inventor managed to drag out the coffee table and a couple of chairs out so they could enjoy the sunny morning. It was nice, but the idea had flaws, the strong winds blowing on this altitude managed to chill him to the bone in a matter of minutes, so he had to retreat inside for a coat. Loki seemed unfazed by the weather, stretching his limbs to catch some sun rays. His hair got quickly tangled by the wind and looked almost like a black fluffy cloud (Tony would never say that the god resembled a sheep, not out loud anyway, he valued his balls, thank you very much).

'Oh? And to what result?'

'He said he could meet us next week. Apparently he has a hideout somewhere in New York and is currently on location so yeah, that's it. Maybe we'll finally get some answers.'

The god just smiled. He was skeptical to say the least, Odin's spell work was familiar to him, but what could a mere mortal know about it? Frigga, Loki mused, would be the best candidate to help him break the binding, but he did not want to mix her in his mess. She aided him enough by convincing Thor to break him out of prison and enabled them to flee to Midgard. Moreover, it was probably thanks to her that they weren't pursued by the Einherjar.

A knock on the glass panel behind them managed to startle both the human and the god. Loki tensed anticipating an attack, but Tony's cheerful 'Pepper!' stopped him from lashing out.

'Come, have a breakfast with us!'

'Are you both insane?' Pepper shouted over the wind, her immaculate hair got blown to shreds the instant she stepped outside.

'Possibly,' they said almost in unison and promptly started laughing. The redhead looked at them with pretended disgust.

'It was bad when I had to only deal with Tony, now there's two of you. My nerves won't take it.'

'You love us,' Tony said and was rewarded by Pepper stealing one of his croissants. 'Hey! I licked that!'

'So very mature,' she sighed biting into it anyway.

'What brings you here on this fine day?' The billionaire asked gesturing towards the late morning

sun. He stood up letting Pepper take his place and wiggled his way onto Loki's lap unashamedly, the god's hand snaking around his waist to steady him. He then flashed the happiest smile Pepper had ever seen on the billionaire's face.

'The fitting,' she raised a brow at their confused expressions, 'for the Stark Industries gala tonight. You do remember that it is tonight right?'

'Yeah, but I have a tux, a few even.'

'I am aware, but your date doesn't,' she then eyed Loki's still confused expression. 'You didn't ask him,' the CEO guessed.

'Um...'

'Tony! It was your idea!' Pepper aggressively tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, but the wind just blew it away again.

'What are you talking about?' Loki asked perplexed.

'I will explain everything,' the redhead breathed out heavily abandoning her fight against the wind, 'but please, let's go inside.'

The gang relocated to the kitchen where they could finish their breakfast in peace. While the inventor made fresh coffee Pepper told Loki all about the charity gala they were going to attend. Initially Tony was supposed to come alone, because Pepper's plus one was Happy as they just started dating not long ago, but then the inventor came up with the idea to ask Loki out (except the actual asking part was still a work in progress).

At the beginning Pepper wasn't very happy with that plan, anticipating the frenzy the press would fall in upon seeing the notorious womanizer Tony Stark bringing a man as his date and a former Norse god that terrorized Manhattan once to boot (well normal, non S.H.I.E.L.D. people weren't really aware that it was Loki who lead the alien invasion, because the facts were tampered with by the agency, but there were bound to come out some never before published pictures of the crisis, depicting Loki's face in full detail they would have to address later.) The whole idea was just asking for trouble and it would be inevitably on Pepper's head to deal with it. Yet knowing Tony there was no force that could stop him from achieving his goal once he set his mind to it, so she decided that it would be in her best interest to acquiesce to Tony's wish and minimize the negative effects by planning everything herself. Hence the fitting, because it wasn't only for Loki, all the Avengers would be in attendance and Pepper was sure that none of them, except Natasha, had suitable enough garments for the occasion. They all had to look immaculate, not just for the sake of Stark Industries, but theirs as well, some good press for the Avengers was always a plus, since people always complained more about destroyed property that praised saved lives.

'You would not be ashamed to be seen with me like that,' the god gestured towards his scarred visage, eyebrows drawing together, 'by your associates and coworkers?'

Tony spun abruptly away from the coffee machine, scalding hot coffee spilling over his hand from the cup he was holding.

'Ah fuck!' he cursed as the cup slipped from between his fingers and shattered on the floor. 'Fuck!'

The god was about to rush to the inventor, but Pepper's gentle hand on his shoulder prevented him from standing up. She instead went to the rescue.



'Tony, don't stand like that, put it under cold water,' she scolded bending to pick up the shards.

The genius did as told, his face dark like a thunder cloud.

'Why would you even think I would be ashamed of you?' Tony growled, 'we've been out before!'

'Yes, but never in the company of your associates. I assume my face is not exactly a pleasant sight.'

Pepper looked between them, Loki's expression remained impassive, not one emotion seeping through, in big contrast to Tony's - full of anger and ...hurt? Yet it lasted only a moment. The billionaire squeezed the bridge of his nose with his uninjured hand and without any warning splashed some cold water from the tap over the god.

'You're talking bullshit again Snowflake,' Tony sighed drying his hands on the back of his pants.

Loki squawked with indignation over the assault and then again when a towel landed on his head and Tony started to dry his hair with it.

'You insufferable creature!' The god hissed with fake outrage, his hands flying up to stop the inventor's. The human just laughed and tilted Loki's chin up so he could plant a quick kiss to his lips.

'Will you go with me to the gala?' Stark asked, his breath ghosting over the trickster's lips.

'Yes.' Loki rested his head on his lover's chest, right under the arc reactor relishing in the warmth his body radiated. In the meantime Tony's hands ventured over the god's shoulders and he started kneading the tense flesh. A small pleased sound escaped from the immortal's lips, his lover's skilled fingers doing wonders to his back. Tony bent down and stole another kiss from his god, this one deeper and longer, his tongue sneaking inside Loki's mouth to explore.

'Don't mind me, I'll just see myself out,' Pepper said, a bit of sarcasm coloring her voice, startling the inventor and god alike.

'Sorry,' Tony smiled sheepishly at her, Loki's expression almost mimicking his. The CEO shook her head exasperated.

'Just be ready in an hour, I don't want to explain to the tailor why his costumer is absent.'

'Yes ma'am!' Tony said while mock-saluting her, tugging Loki by the hand towards the exit.

~

'Well, I must say it was a fantastic idea,' Natasha praised looking over Cap's backside with assessing eyes.

'I know, right?' Pepper's gaze lingered for a moment on Thor's naked chest and abdomen.

The boys were all struggling to dress themselves in the provided tuxedos with various results. Tony quite used to wearing one was helping Loki out, or more like ogling Loki, with his mile long legs now clad in dark, perfectly cut dress pants and his waist and back accented by the jacket. Natasha's focus moved from the pair to her date. She was a little surprised to see Clint already dressed up and ready for the tailor to make any last minute changes. He looked good, really elegant, the only color to break the black and white combination came from the purple pocket square he wore. When Clint noticed her stare he adjusted his bowtie with a flourish and flashed her a cheshire smile. Natasha only rolled her eyes, a small smirk tugging a corner of her mouth up.

'Lady Pepper I must ask for your assistance with the bowtie, I am not familiar with the knot.' Thor smiled at them brightly. It made him really happy that Loki would also be allowed to attend the event. As Pepper approached the blond god Natasha made her way towards Steve.

'Need a hand?'

'Thank you. I'm familiar with it. I used to tie my friend's bowtie every time he went on a date,' Steve smiled sadly, making a quick work of the knot.

'How is he?' The spy asked straightening the lapels of his suit.

'Better, thank you. Still confused sometimes, but better.'

'You should bring him here sometimes, maybe Tony and Bruce could help.'

Steve just shook his head.

'He needs peace and quiet, not doctors and engineers. He had enough of those.'

'If you say so,' Natasha shrugged. 'Then maybe just to say hi and be among people who would understand.'

'Maybe you're right. I'll think about it.' Cap smiled, this time a happier smile. Natasha was certain it wouldn't take long for him to introduce Bucky to the rest of the team.

~

'Oh man, how I hate bowties,' Clint whined trying to loosen the knot a bit. Natasha swatted at his hand. 'Don't touch it,' she hissed.

In comparison to asgardian regal wear, Loki mussed, midgardian formal clothing was much more comfortable and light, too light almost, because he felt as if he wore scarcely anything at all. The fine, soft fabric felt like mist and wind on his skin, nothing like the stiff leathers and metal of his usual garb. For a moment Loki entertained a vision of Tony in those leathers and metal, all regal and beautiful. He imagined him bursting into the throne room, as an ambassador of Midgard maybe, long fiercely red cape swirling behind his back like flames torn by the wind. So powerful, so gorgeous.

The god made a small sound in the back of his throat and shifted in his seat suddenly uncomfortable as his cock stiffened in interest at the mental image. He had to breathe in deeply a few times to calm himself enough so his erection wouldn't be visible through the pants.

'You know,' he jumped slightly at Pepper's voice suddenly close by. 'If you want we could maybe conceal the scars a little. Apply some make-up. What do you think?' She addressed Natasha who just stepped closer to them.

'There shouldn't be a problem with the discoloration, but you won't be able to hide those raised scars, they will be visible at a closer look,' the spy added.

'It is unnecessary. At this point I assume it would upset him more than it is worth it,' the trickster sighed. If he had his magic there would not be a problem, one more glamour to his already cloaked visage would barely count.

'Oh? Tony's against it?' Natasha inquired curiously.

'It is nothing.'

'They had an argument this morning,' Pepper clarified sitting next to the god on the sofa with Natasha hovering just outside his range.

'He's going to be the prettiest prom date in the building anyway, he doesn't need any make-up,' Tony suddenly materialized behind Loki and encircled the immortal's shoulders with his arms.

'Stark!' The trickster rolled his eyes and bend forward dragging Tony over the backrest, so the engineer was half suspended in the air with his legs dangling good thirty centimeters in the air.

'Whoa!' The genius yelped clinging to Loki for dear life.

Pepper scowled at them.

'I think it is time to go, before you two ruin all my hard work.'

~

Everything was going according to plan for what Pepper was very grateful. The party has been in full swing for over an hour and as of yet she didn't hear any complaints. Tony was sober, the Avengers were mingling with the crowd and the press has been kept at bay away from Loki. Tony would have to give an interview, because his arrival with the deity didn't go unnoticed (how could it have been if they all arrived in a luxurious limousine, the paparazzi swarming around it like moths over flame just to get a glimpse and maybe manage to make some embarrassing photos), but for once everything went as it was supposed to. An uproar however aroused in the journalists ranks gathered on the other side of the red carpet when Tony's hand rested at the small of Loki's back as the billionaire bent really close, almost brushing his lips over the god's cheek and said something to him. They were momentarily blinded by the onslaught of flashes and questions, but Tony only smiled as if indulging a child and led his entourage inside.

Speaking of the gracious host, he was making rounds now, greeting the more important guests and exchanging small talk with acquaintances, but Pepper managed to lose him temporarily in the colorful crowd. Instead she took a glance at the Avengers table, only Loki and Bruce sat there engrossed in some argument, Thor and Steve were at the bar and Natasha twirled with Clint on the dance floor. And then she noticed Tony, he stood under one of the large columns supporting the high ceiling and looked oddly at the pair of agents, a sort of longing in his gaze.

'Why won't you ask Loki for a dance?' Pepper said slipping next to the billionaire. That would probably make the headlines tomorrow, but she was in a good mood and dealing with the news would be worth it just to wipe that look from Tony's face.

'I did,' he answered turning his gaze towards her.

'And?'

'He refused. He said he doesn't want to make a fool of himself,' the inventor shrugged.

'And you're pouting.'

'It's stupid, I know, I just really wanted to dance with him,' Tony raked a hand through his spiky hair.

'No, I understand,' the CEO shook her head, 'dance with me instead and I'll think of something'.

'You're my hero,' Tony laughed out loud as he took her hand and led her to the dance floor.

~

The gala was coming to a close. Most of the guests already left and only a few were still loitering. From the Avengers only Tony, Natasha and Clint were still around, the assassin duo probably on Loki detail.

Tony approached Pepper as she sent off the last of the guests.

'I'm glad you decided to stay,' she smiled at him tiredly, but with affection.

'You said it would be worth it,' the inventor shrugged looking around over the almost empty hall. His eyes lingered on a silhouette near one of the big windows. Loki also looked tired, Tony assumed it had a lot to do with them being surrounded by crowds of unknown people all evening. For the last few months there was decidedly less company constantly around him, so the change must have been overwhelming.

The billionaire yawned himself and he was quite surprised, because it was barely midnight.

'We are going home,' Pepper decided, subtly signaling Natasha that she was ready to depart and they both with Clint drifted closer.

'Huh? But you said...'

'You have the whole ballroom to yourself. The security has been informed that you will be staying late and they won't bother you. Have fun,' Pepper patted him on the cheek playfully.

It took way too long for the cogs in Tony's brain to start turning and register what she meant, but when he finally managed to process the information a big, happy grin lit up his face.

'Ew gross! You're smiling like a maniac man,' Clint imitated puking, but Stark just smiled wider.

'Shut up bird brain. Thanks Pep, you really are my hero. Now shoo, go home, I have a god waiting for me,' the inventor laughed and jogged straight to Loki, giddy with excitement like a teen on his first date.

The deity had this power over him; with Loki all kinds of stupid and sappy things Tony would never do with any other date felt right, like the god was the only one entitled to make those moments special and theirs.

Loki turned from the window and a sly smile curved his lips.

'You heard?' The engineer asked taking the god's hand.

'Yes.'

'Good, let's go.'

Once again they entered the vast ballroom, this time not bothered by anyone. Only one grand chandelier was still lit bathing the dance floor in a warm golden light.

Suddenly Tony felt like a protagonist of a Disney movie when the story was ending, the girl could finally dance with her prince and they could live happily ever after. A chuckle involuntarily left his lips.

'What?' Loki asked.

'God this feels like a fairy tale, a real god damn ballroom, a prince and a dance!' The billionaire spontaneously spun Loki around, 'and I hope a happy ending. Don't run away Cinderella when the clock strikes midnight! Oh wait, that would be me and it's past midnight already.'

'Anthony you are not making any sense,' the god chided managing to right himself before colliding with the human.

'I'm just happy,' Tony nuzzled his nose under Loki's jaw and then standing on tiptoes planted a kiss on the god's lips. His hands rested on the taller man's hips and they started rocking slowly.

'Uh we need music,' Stark took out his phone and peered at the screen. 'Jarvis hit me with something good!'

*As you wish sir* flashed once on the display and when the first few tunes sounded around them Tony almost fainted.

'Really?!' the inventor hissed at the device as *Tale as old as time* started playing in earnest, thank god the version without lyrics.

'Is something the matter?' the trickster enquired sneaking his hands around Tony's neck.

'No, no. I was just surprised by his sense of humor, but it's fine. This is fine!'

Loki beamed at him as they slowly swayed to Disney's greatest love songs and Tony just silently wished that there would be no Gaston to fuck up his fairy tale.

~ ~ ~



## Chapter 22

Tony sighed agonizingly. This was a disaster. This. was. hell. He reached out a hand, but the device he aimed at was out of reach.

'Jarvis,' he whined desperately, but nothing happened.

*'I am unable to assist you sir, I'm sorry,'* the AI's muffled voice apologized from Stark's phone.

'Oh come on, think, because I have nothing.'

After stretching additional few millimeters and still being unable to grab it Tony finally capitulated and stood up from the couch to retrieve the damn remote. Lazily he started skipping through the available channels without much interest, just too busy himself with something. He was confined to the royal suite in The Park Tower Knightsbridge Hotel, because after getting wasted the night before in the hotel bar, Pepper wouldn't listen to his reassurances that he wouldn't do it again. And it was truly an accident, he just wanted to take the edge off, the day was really hard, full of meetings and negotiations that ended them nowhere, both sides dissatisfied with the terms the other proposed. It was supposed to be only a formality, a handshake and good luck wishes, but suddenly the investors found a billion things they wanted to change in the initial draft of the contract (and even the designs!) and both he and Pepper had to repeatedly explain to them what a irrational idea that was. He was exhausted both physically and mentally from dealing with those morons and craved to just sit in his lab with Loki and work for some time on something simple, then take his god to bed and slowly love him for hours on end. Instead he was dying of boredom in this hotel room with nothing to do. He could call his lover on the new and shiny voice activated StarkPhone, but they talked not long ago, and he didn't want to make Loki feel like he was checking on him every few hours.

Tony grunted flopping on the couch.

They both thought it would be over by now - the whole blindness/bound magic thing, but they were wrong and even when Loki's face remained neutral after their meeting with Strange, Tony knew that he too hoped to be finally rid of those shackles. But of course nothing could go according to plan.

They went to the meeting mildly excited and in good moods. Strange invited them to his Sanctum Sanctorum located in the Greenwich Village. First they talked about the circumstances in which Loki acquired the markings and then the Doctor proceeded to examine them. He made Loki take off his sweater so he could see the whole image. After poking, prodding and murmuring to himself for a good half an hour Strange finally came to a conclusion that it was in fact possible to undo Odin's handiwork, but of course there was a *but*. The Sorcerer Supreme admitted that he didn't precisely understand the workings of that binding and so undoing it without that knowledge would be impossible. He needed time to study and a lot of it, because apparently the spell was very complex and multidimensional. When asked how much time he had in mind the Doctor answered that a year

at least, probably more. That was like a punch to the gut, because Tony had really high hopes regarding that visit, but once again life spat on them. He saw the light of reluctant hope leaving Loki's unseeing eyes and it was really heartbreaking. The inventor cursed himself, he could have talked to the sorcerer alone at first, maybe show him some scans and photographs of Loki's sigils. Instead he planted hope in the god's heart and then watched how it was crushed.

The worst thing was that the trickster tried to play it cool, shrug it off and just go back to the now somewhat familiar routine, but Tony saw how frustrated it made him; the inability to do something, to fight for his wellbeing, for his life and instead being left handicapped and with a mere fraction of power that once took only a small effort to invoke.

When they came back home Loki wanted to be left alone claiming that he was tired, but Tony literally dragged him to the big, comfortable sofa in the living room, sat him down and wouldn't let go. They spent the evening cuddling while some colorful romantic comedy played in the background. All the time Tony sat behind the god, his arms around the deity drawing small patterns on the porcelain skin, his lips skimming from time to time over Loki's throat and shoulder until the god finally drifted off to sleep.

He never said anything, Stark mused skipping through seemingly endless amount of channels, not once complained or blamed Tony, he just accepted the fact that the sigils weren't going anywhere any time soon.

They spent the night on the sofa closely entwined. Tony's arc reactor skipped a cycle at the sight that greeted him when he opened his eyes the next morning. The god's face was scant centimeters away from his, framed by a dark halo of raven-black, curly hair. He was still sleeping so the inventor could memorize every detail of his godly features; the long dark eyelashes casting shadows on scarred cheeks and the sharp cheekbones he adored so much. Over the time the god spent in Avengers Tower the scarring faded quite a bit and it wasn't so angry red anymore, Loki's natural enhanced healing ability repairing what it could. There were also the small puncture scars around his lips that the inventor totally forgot about, because not being made by the snake's venom they healed quite well. Tony lightly touched one of them wondering how someone could be so cruel to sentence another to such punishment. Loki scrunched his nose, but didn't wake up allowing the genius to continue his exploration. The pads of Tony's fingers skimmed over the god's cheeks and he wondered why the trickster never had to shave, was it a genetic trait or maybe part of the glamour thing? Next he wanted to touch the raised scars marring the area around the deity's eyes, yet he barely managed to touch it when Loki's head jerked away.

'Please don't.'

'Sorry, does it still hurt?'

The god just shook his head and tried to disentangle himself from Tony, but the inventor wouldn't let him.

'No, stay, it's still very early,' he grabbed Loki's arm and lightly tugged on the sleeve, 'babe...'

The god went still for a moment as if considering his options and then cautiously lowered himself on top of the inventor.

'I shouldn't, yet I am unable to distance myself from you,' the trickster gently traced a finger over Tony's lips and nose just like the inventor did to him a moment before.

'Then don't, we're good like that.'

'Are we?'

'Yeah,' Tony embraced the god and moved him a bit to lie more comfortably.

'I'll have to take your word on that,' the trickster breathed out and his fingers started tracing patterns on Tony's cheek. The engineer lifted a brow.

'Are you drawing a dick on my face?' he asked incredulous.

'Maybe,' Loki drawled snickering.

'I'm outraged! I'll tickle you for that! No mercy!' Tony shouted as they started wrestling on the sofa laughing like children. At some point they landed on the floor and tickling transformed into groping and their lips clashed in a heated kiss.

'*Sir, sir!*' Jarvis' tiny voice shouted from Tony's phone pulling him out of his reverie.

'What is it J?'

'*There is news footage on channel 36 I think you wouldn't want to miss,*' the AI informed.

Tony fumbled for a moment with the remote and flipped to the aforementioned channel, concentrating on the screen.

A big explosion flashed in the background resulting in a rain of chunks of buildings hitting the streets with high velocity, smashing some cars parked by the curb in the process. Then the camera zoomed in on something falling from one of the nearby buildings and Tony's eyes bulged because that thing looked like one of his older armors, but the grainy footage that shook with every new explosion wasn't really helping in identifying what that thing really was. It landed on the pavement cracking the concrete underneath. Somewhere off camera the journalist urged the cameraman to get a little closer for a better shot and as he cautiously made his way towards the attacker Tony could verify if it was one of his old projects. As it happened, on a second glance this suit, robot or whatever it was, didn't resemble all that much any of his creations, just the general idea and slightly similar faceplate. The construct was all dark steel wrapped in a weird green cloak like some kind of unholy fusion between him and Loki, something that might have happened if both of them were drunk and attempting to do science.

All of a sudden another one came out from the side alley, then two others after it.

One more explosion shook the street, the screams of frightened pedestrians momentarily drown by it. People were running in panic in all directions creating more chaos that it was strictly necessary. Just like on the day of the Chitauri invasion, the inventor's mind supplied. Tony had to back away from the screen when a sudden panic attack gripped him by the throat and squeezed. His back hit the sofa and a strangled whine escaped his lips. *Not now!* he wanted to scream, but couldn't, the terrified voices from the TV heightening his distress even more.

'Jarvis,' he breathed with effort through clenched teeth, 'call Loki.'

'*Dialing,*' the AI replied instantly sensing his creator's discomfort.

After a few signals Tony started hyperventilating imagining the weirdest shit like Loki standing on one of the buildings, cackling like a madman, one of the green cloaks wrapped around his lithe body.

Two more signals and the line clicked assaulting Tony's ears with the sound of roaring engines and was that an explosion somewhere in the background?

The engineer had to close his eyes when a sudden attack of nausea rocked his body.

'Anthony?' The god asked slightly out of breath, his voice involuntarily managing to calm the billionaire a fraction.

When no answer came he tried again anxiously.

'Tony? Are you there? Are you alright?'

A weird mechanized shout muffled the last few words, but Tony squeezed the phone closer to his ear.

'Where are you?' the inventor finally managed to croak out.

When the silence lasted too long for Tony's liking, only the sounds of falling fragments of buildings and people's shouts filling the space between them, Stark's nerves snapped and he shouted to the speaker.

'What the fuck are you doing?!'

'I'm assisting with the attack,' the god admitted reluctantly, his voice quiet over the line.

Tony's body shook like in a fever, the panic attack now doubled by the god's admission. The inventor wondered briefly how the trickster managed to pull a stunt like that in such a short time.

Suddenly a familiar figure crossed the screen running at full speed towards one of the bots. Loki skidded to a stop in front of the construct and touched an open palm to its sternum, or the chest plate imitating it. Tony almost dropped the phone as a sharp stab of pain pierced his heart. Has he been played again? Was the attack Loki's doing? He didn't want to believe that, but the green cloak and the bots... His thoughts started running in circle alternating between doubt and trust.

The lack of carbon dioxide, the consequence from the hyperventilation resulted in a tunnel vision concentrated on the familiar silhouette dodging to the left and disappearing off screen. The woman journalist was shouting something, but Tony was too far gone to care.

'Why?' He whispered, voice wrecked.

'Tony?' Loki whizzed.

'Why are you doing this?'

'The Captain asked me,' the god coughed and swore under his breath when yet another explosion tore the buildings nearby apart.

'What?' The billionaire asked confused.

'The constructs have an element of magic in them,' the trickster explained, 'and the Captain wanted to know if we could somehow counter it.'

'Wait, what?' Tony repeated suddenly not understanding what was going on. 'Steve... Steve asked you?'

'Yes, Anthony are you ill? The god asked with concern. Somewhere in the background Natasha's

voice ordered them to take cover instantly followed by a salvo from a machine gun.

'No I... Oh god, you're with the team... And I thought... Jesus!'

'You thought what? That I was behind this attack?' Loki asked offended.

'Because... The Iron man resemblance and the green cloaks... I...' The inventor stuttered confused.

'Anthony, they are not your suits. I have to go, we need to move. I will get angry at you properly later.'

'Babe!' Tony shouted before the god could break the connection, 'I'm sorry.'

'You better be,' Loki replied, a hint of mirth in his voice.

~

In the end Loki managed to determine that the only way to stop those robots from constantly self-repairing themselves was to completely dismember each and every one of them. That was the signal for doctor Banner to take the spotlight. Aided by Thor they managed to get rid of them fairly quickly. But the fight wasn't without casualties. Somehow one of the cloaked robots managed to sneak up on Hawkeye concealed on one of the nearby rooftops and attack him. Only thanks to his lifelong training and good reflexes the spy avoided being strangled to death, instead shielding himself with his bow arm as the robot grabbed onto it with its vice like grip. Before anyone from the team managed to reach him Clint's forearm was crushed by the bot. He had to be later put under sedation, because the pain and the shock were so overwhelming. And so the team came back from Washington in rather sour moods.

Loki dragged his feet to Stark's bedroom intending on sleeping for the whole next day. He was aching and exhausted from extensive use of magic for the last few hours. Then he remembered he was supposed to call Tony back.

The immortal took out the phone Stark made especially for him and collapsed on the bed.

'Jarvis is Anthony awake?'

*'Yes, he's been waiting for you to call him.'*

The god hummed stretching on top of the covers.

'Make the call then, please.'

It took a fraction of a second for the inventor to pick up and he instantly blurt out.

'I'msoveryfuckingsorry, you can't even imagine!'

'I hope so,' Loki sat on the bed and furrowed his brow, 'what were you thinking?'

'Uh I might have been fooled by the combination of robot and flowy green cape... and a panic attack. I was kinda having an episode of that too.'

The god fumbled with the fastening of his boot with one hand, the other occupied by the slim StarkPhone.



*'Shall I put Mr. Stark on speaker sir?*

'Thank you Jarvis. What happened?' He asked Tony.

'I don't know, I just freaked out, got triggered by the footage, it looked a lot like the Chitauri invasion.'

'Tony...' Loki whispered with concern settling under covers. Panic attacks were rare nowadays, they both thought them to be now only in the past.

'No, no I'm fine now. I just wanted to hear you.' There was so much warmth in Tony's voice that Loki's heart started beating faster from just listening to it.

'And so you imagined that in a handful of days I managed to build myself a small army of automatons?' The god mocked. His head rested on Tony's pillow and he nuzzled his cheek against it. Only a couple of days and his lover would be back home.

'Uh, you won't let me forget this, will you?'

'No, I demand satisfaction,' the god huffed out a chuckle.

'Oh I can give you satisfaction all right! Babe, are you in bed?' Tony suddenly asked, wanting dripping from his voice.

'Yes, yours,' Loki purred shifting under the covers so the inventor could hear them move.

'Fuck! Jarvis display the camera feed on my tablet.'

'That's unfair,' the god whined, but at the same time wriggled from under the sheets for Stark to see, his naked body on full display.

'God Loki you're so gorgeous. Touch yourself for me babe.'

The inventor's eyes avidly followed the god's hand sliding slowly from his chest and over deliciously chiseled abdomen and lower still, towards his half hard cock.

'Just like that,' Tony panted, hardening rapidly himself.

Loki's skilled fingers managed, with a few practiced strokes to make him rock hard and groaning Tony's name loudly.

'I want you here,' the trickster hissed thumbing his slit and smearing precome all over the head of his cock.

'I want to be there,' Tony sighed freeing himself from the confines of his jeans. 'I swear, when I come back, I won't let you leave the bedroom for at least a week.'

'Mm I have to object. The counter in the kitchen could serve our needs just fine.'

Tony stroked himself fast and hard imagining it: Loki spread wide over the black marble countertop, his porcelain skin dotted with bites and love marks.

'Fuck! I could come from just thinking about it.'

'Then do, love,' he heard Loki sigh out and after a few more strokes backed up by the gorgeous image displayed on his tablet Tony came hard with the god's name on his lips.

## Chapter 23

The afternoon sun poured through the big window on the other side of the room making the expensive tiles look like pure molten gold. The spring breeze slipped through the opened balcony doors and ruffled Natasha's hair.

The only sound in the room came from the traffic many, many stories down. Their silence was getting awkward and it worried Natasha, because this has never happened before. Normally it was always comfortable; if neither of them had anything to say they just sat there quietly or found things to do. Now Natasha wanted to say something, reassure, but there were no words left to say that she didn't try earlier. The diagnosis was simple: 78% loss of mobility in the right hand, severed tendons and muscles, bones crushed into small pieces. There was no good news, but thanks to whoever was listening that they didn't decide to amputate, it would have drove Clint mad. His life as an archer was over, technically he could switch to a hand gun and learn to shoot with his left hand to still remain active, because Natasha just couldn't imagine Barton sitting in a control room surrounded by monitors and giving them strategic advice. Sure it was possible, but Clint was too restless and full of energy to appreciate that, he had to be in the field and observe their battles with his own sharp gaze.

'Tasha,' Hawkeye started, his voice wavering slightly, 'what will I do if I have to retire?'

'I don't know. Go on long walks with your dog. Get a normal life instead whatever it is that people like us have,' Natasha shrugged. 'You'll find something, but don't give up on me just yet.'

'What other option do I have? I'm not field ready and I don't want to be tossed on the Helicarrier or Triskelion or any other of S.H.I.E.L.D. secret bases to do paperwork. I would start crawling walls on the first day.' He made a face, probably imagining the bleak future.

The redhead peered at Clint's mangled hand; it was in a heavy cast to prevent any jostling and movement that might undo the doctor's hard work. Natasha blamed herself for this, she was supposed to backup Hawkeye, but the fight got hectic, they were separated and her Widow sting didn't affect the robots as it should have, forcing her into close, hand-to-hand combat, or rather leaping on the opponents backs and trying to rip out any wires in sight. Not a very good tactic, but she was quite desperate. And then came help from a very unlikely source. In a dash throughout the wrecked streets of Washington D.C., dodging bullets and energy blasts, a voice she would never expect to hear in such circumstances sounded in her ear through the comm.

'The self-repairing ability has magical properties, I would need to touch one of those constructs to get a better understanding of how it precisely works.'

Natasha heard how Clint swore a blue streak, his comm going quiet for a moment and then cracking back to life.

'What is he doing here?' The archer growled.

'Consulting,' Steve answered swiftly, an echo of bullets ricocheting from the shield following his words. 'Loki proved to be a valuable asset in fight once before and I asked for his opinion on this, because we are getting overwhelmed here.'

'What can you tell us brother?' Thor boomed and Natasha had a moment of respite to observe how he smashed opponents with his prized hammer.

'Very little,' the younger god admitted and it was instantly followed by Clint's sarcastic: 'Consultant, my ass.'

'I need to get closer to one to determine how to deal with them. With my abilities limited as they are physical contact is a must for me to gather any information about the weave.'

'Weave?' Cap asked slightly confused.

'Yes, the body of a spell, a blueprint if you will.'

'Right, we'll make you an opening.'

'We are going to fight back to back brother! Like in the old days!' Thor hefted Mjölnir high above his head and with a great force smashed one of the bots into the nearest building.

'Joy,' Loki sighed.

'So how did he get here so fast?' Hawkeye asked emptying his quiver with a renewed force.

There was a moment of silence and then:

'I flew him in,' Coulson said in a matter of fact tone.

'Oh, hi Phil, how it's going?' Clint started, but was interrupted by Steve.

'Can we please focus on the fight?'

Loki determined that the spell that let the androids reassemble themselves was incorporated in the body of each bot individually, so they didn't necessarily need the caster to defeat them. It would make the fight so much shorter, but the creator didn't make an appearance yet. The down side was that to undo the spell Loki would have to touch every single one of the constructs. Not having a better plan the team started methodically smashing their opponents. And then, when they were almost finished one of the robots managed to put Clint out of commission.

Natasha bit the inside of her cheek thinking. The physiotherapy might help to improve the hand's mobility and muscle strength a fraction, but the damage was really severe. Other than a damn miracle from God she couldn't see any up sides.

A knock on the door made them both jump a little, because Steve was there not even an hour ago and Coulson went home not much later. Bruce also checked on them earlier when Clint was still sleeping, bringing with him a nice cup of flavored tea for Natasha.

The redhead stood up and opened the door a fraction so the archer wouldn't see, having an inkling

to who it might be. Just like she thought Loki stood in the doorway and when she scrutinized him the god inclined his head in greeting.

'Nat?' Clint called from the bed, he was craning his head to see who came to visit this time.

The spy stepped aside and let the trickster in.

Barton's hackles immediately went up and his fractured hand jerked in search of a weapon before he realized that he wouldn't be able to use it even if he wanted to.

'What do you want?' He growled instead. 'Came back to finish the job?'

'I came to offer my skills,' Loki looked seemingly harmless and unthreatening in plain blue sweater and dark skinny jeans, his long hair tied in a bun on his neck.

'Being a cocksucker counts as a skill now?' Barton taunted and Natasha cautiously stepped towards the cupboard where she knew Clint kept his spare guns. Loki didn't come here to fight them, but the archer's big mouth could change that pretty quickly.

But the god only snorted, a sardonic smile blooming on his lips.

'I do not think you would benefit from that skill, no. I came to offer you my healing abilities.'

'Why?' Natasha asked genuinely curious.

'I have a debt to pay to agent Barton. And while his hostility towards me is understandable it is destroying his friendship with Anthony and I do not wish to be the cause of that.'

'No, fuck off. I don't want you touching me ever again.'

'Clint!' The redhead exclaimed amazed by the self-destructive decision of her partner.

'As you wish,' the god shrugged, but when he was leaving he exchanged a meaningful look with Natasha.

'You are a total moron,' she huffed when the doors clicked close.

'I don't need his pity,' Barton mumbled not looking at her.

The woman only shook her head, she had some persuading to do.

~

*'Sir, agent Romanoff wishes to speak to you.'*

'Please invite her in Jarvis.'

*'As you say.'*

A moment later the elevator opened and Natasha strolled into the grand living room on Stark's floor. Loki greeted her from the big, comfortable sofa and motioned for her to join him.

'Did you succeed in persuading agent Barton?' The god inquired, getting straight to the point without any meaningless pleasantries.

'First I need to know if you are able to reverse the damage done to him.'

Natasha watched Loki stand up, his expression thoughtful as he went to the bar and poured each of them a drink from a decanter he took out from under the countertop.

'Do not fret, it is only Anthony's praised scotch, nothing more. And to answer your question: I am unable to, as you put it: *reverse* the damage done to the archer, this power does not work like that. Although I can force his organism to mend the broken tissue and bone faster and convince it to even repair the damage that is beyond its normal capacity,' the trickster explained between sips of alcohol.

'That is a lot beautiful promises without anything solid to back them up,' the redhead pointed out still examining her tumbler. Finally she took a sip and looked straight at the deity. 'I need more than that.'

Loki just shrugged unfazed.

'You had numerous occasions to observe how I heal; it is not a neat and painless process to both me and the other person.'

'Why are you doing this then? What is there for you to gain?'

The spy stood up and moved to the wall of glass from where a great vista of New York unfolded. The setting sun painted everything in crimson, lighting the glass skyscrapers aflame with its vibrancy.

'As I said before,' he started, 'I have a debt to repay to Barton for enslaving his mind in such a brutal manner. I am not sorry for it, because he played an instrumental role in my plan, but I recognize that forcing him to give out secrets about his race and fight against you was straining to him mentally and physically. Moreover I understand that he and Anthony were great friends before Thor brought me here. I wish to somewhat mend their broken relationship if it is possible, because I can sense that Stark misses it dearly.' Loki went quiet letting Natasha mull that over in her mind. He slowly sipped his drink and waited. Finally she moved away from the window and placed the empty tumbler on the countertop.

'I did manage to persuade him, but he said he needs to be totally drunk before he will let you near him.'

'As long as he doesn't sing,' Loki smiled.

Natasha looked at him puzzled.

'Do I want to know?'

'Probably not,' the god smiled even wider.

~

As it happened Clint couldn't get drunk thanks to all the meds S.H.I.E.L.D. doctors prescribed to him what put him in a really sour mood.

Loki came back the next afternoon with Bruce trailing behind. It was a great opportunity to observe such unconventional (by Earth standards) way of treating injuries.

Barton watched Loki's every move still convinced that it was some kind of trick. The god gingerly sat at the edge of the bed and frowned as his fingertips touched the cast.



'I need this removed,' he said.

'What, your godly powers are too weak to work through plaster?' Clint snorted.

'Yes actually, unless you want pieces of it imbedded into your skin.'

After a couple of minutes Bruce came back with curved scissors designed for removing casts and swiftly dealt with Clint's. The exposed arm looked really awful, marred with fresh scars and now mostly dark purple and beginning to go yellow bruises. Loki gently pressed his fingers to the inflamed skin and started his examination.

'Could you walk me through what you are doing?' Bruce asked excited.

'I am trying to determine the extent of damage made. I'm sending a small amount of *Seiðr* inside his arm to better comprehend what needs to be fixed. I'm not a trained healer, but have enough experience to know how the muscles and nerves should feel like when healthy,' Loki explained absently, focusing on the task. He then repeated the procedure on the archer's other arm just to be sure.

'So without knowing the anatomy and how the body works you can't heal?' Doctor Banner asked intrigued.

'Oh you can certainly try, but it is risky to the one being healed if you do it incorrectly. For example: just willing for the wound to close itself will stop the patient from bleeding out on the floor, but the vein will remain broken and he will bleed out internally. With a broken bone you not only have to set it back and quicken the process of knitting, but also know exactly the stages required in closing the gap between the fracture, the reduction of swelling and proper distribution of blood in the adjoined vessels.'

'Fascinating!' Bruce exclaimed.

'Uh can we get this over with? I'm starting to change my mind.'

'The procedure,' Loki said to Clint, 'will have to be split into two parts. Today I will take care primarily of the bone. Because it is in such a poor state I will have to spend a significant amount of *Seiðr* and it will probably take a lot of time. It will also be extremely painful to both of us. I would advise sedation.'

'No, I want to be conscious and see what you are doing to me,' the archer disagreed and Loki just shrugged.

'You will not be able to see anything anyway and if you do not trust me then trust in doctor Banner and Miss Romanoff. Also I require utmost concentration and your screams and squirming would only distract me.'

'Fine,' Clint grumbled and glared towards Natasha silently communicating with her.

'Well then, shall we begin?'

~

In the end Bruce didn't learn anything valuable, mostly because the actual healing process required silence so that Loki wouldn't by accident do any further damage to Clint and therefore couldn't walk the doctor through the steps he took.

The humans stayed late into the night observing the god. Loki was in a kind of trance focusing all his magic and will (Bruce assumed) to quicken Clint's recovery.

At some point the strain started showing on the trickster's features. His lips were tightly pressed together and his jaw was set. Perspiration started condensing on his brow and temples, and after another hour or so his fingers, until now evenly spread above Clint's arm, started to spasm and tremble.

When the god's whole body started to shake and his breath became elevated Bruce seriously began to worry.

'Loki you have to stop,' he whispered enough for the deity to hear, but not so loud to be startled by the sudden foreign sound and lose concentration.

'I am almost done,' the god grunted through clenched teeth.

'Your nose is bleeding,' Natasha observed scrutinizing his features with a frown.

'I am... almost...' Loki whizzed, blood bubbling over his upper lip. 'Done!'

The god collapsed onto the bed, his forehead firmly pressed to the sheets next to Clint's shoulder.

'Loki!'

'I am fine, I just need rest. Please wrap his hand firmly in some linen and do not let him use it for now. The nerves and muscles are not working properly yet.' Loki shuddered then sighed heavily.

'We'll worry about that later,' Bruce said getting up from his armchair. 'Let's get you to bed now okay?' He carefully lifted Loki from the bed and wrapped an arm around his waist. 'Can you walk?'

The *yes* was barely audible and Bruce cursed himself for not asking more questions beforehand and setting some limits, because Loki's good health was as equally important as Clint's and now he feared it might be in jeopardy.

'You good here?' The doctor asked Natasha.

'Yes, go. I will take care of this idiot, you take care of the other one,' she replied exasperated, but Bruce noticed a hint of worry in her eyes, so he grabbed Loki more comfortably and dragged him towards the elevator.

His arms were straining when he finally managed to get the god to his (or rather Tony's, per Jarvis' suggestion) bedroom. The doctor gently lowered the almost unconscious god onto the bed and covered him with a blanket. He touched a hand to the trickster's forehead, but it was cool, almost too cool.

'Jarvis? I am not familiar with Loki's physiology. Is this low temperature normal?'

'*Yes sir, his body is naturally a few degrees lower than human's,*' the AI answered calmly.

Bruce nodded and stood up.

'Would you monitor him for me? I better check on Clint before I go to sleep.'

'*Of course sir. May I add that Mister Stark's jet will be landing soon.*'

'Tony's coming home already?' The scientist asked surprised. Tony was supposed to be back in a

couple of days.

*'Yes, he managed to persuade Miss Pots that he was needed here more.'*

Bruce chuckled casting a last glance at the sleeping god.

'Welcome him home from me.'

*'Certainly sir.'*

~

Tony quietly closed the doors behind himself and shrugged off his jacket. It was nearly 4 a.m. here in the US and he was dead tired and jetlagged, but happy to finally be home. A shirt joined the jacket on the floor and in the light of the reactor the inventor could see his favorite god sleeping in his bed. Tony slipped under the covers and hugged Loki from behind close to himself.

'I'm home,' he whispered into the soft black locks and almost instantly drifted off to sleep.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 24

Natasha groaned stretching out her legs; sitting in the same position for hours didn't do them good. She absentmindedly massaged the left calf to get rid of the irritating tingling sensation while skimming through the accumulated video files.

Reviewing the surveillance footage of Loki listening to audio books or music was so damn boring she wanted to throw her laptop at the nearest wall. The most thrill the spy had so far was when Loki wandered into Stark's workshop. Natasha thought that he would finally reveal his sinister intentions; maybe try to disable Jarvis or mess with one of Tony's suits (and wasn't it unsettling that Loki was one of only three people that had unrestricted access to that place?). But boy was she disappointed when he went straight to Dum-E's docking station and proceeded to play with the bot for hours and she had to fast forward through it all.

It was a daunting job, but maybe for the first time in her life Natasha felt reservation when she installed those bugs and tiny cameras in Stark's apartment and workshop. She considered him a friend now, after all the debacle with the Chitauri and after, they kind of bonded just a little. The Stark, and now Avengers Tower was the closest thing she might call home, a place where she could relax without needing at least one handgun under the nearest pillow; that is until the god of mischief came along and destroyed that peace. And as much as she respected Stark and his genius she agreed with Fury that Loki had to be monitored at all times. So a plan was set in motion that allowed her the access to Stark's private floor and workshop to install the surveillance. One place she refused to place any cameras was the master bedroom (she bugged it properly, but without any video recording equipment). Natasha felt she owed Tony that much. Moreover the spy was the first person that went through all the footage every day to screen it for any unwanted behavior from the god and only if she found anything worth reviewing she sent it to S.H.I.E.L.D.

A beep notified her that one of the cameras in the penthouse was activated through some kind of motion so the redhead paused the recording she was viewing and focused instead on the silhouette on the screen.

'Fuck!' the person hissed bumping into one of the armchairs and almost toppling over it. Natasha sniggered recognizing Stark navigating the spacious living room in the dark. He was a couple of days earlier that he was scheduled to come back, probably cajoled Pepper to let him go home ahead of time thanks to today's, or well yesterday's fight with the robot army.

During the fight Natasha noticed that Loki had a StarkPhone, a one of a kind device, not available on the market, probably created by the genius himself just for the blind god. It was worth to have it bugged too, the woman mused, but with it being almost entirely translucent and very thin, it would be practically impossible to execute.

She watched as Tony cautiously crossed the floor and disappeared in the corridor leading to the bedroom, where she knew Loki slept. She switched to the audio and was greeted by a shuffling sound of clothes being removed as Tony made his way towards the bed.

'I'm home,' Natasha heard the inventor murmur, 'I so fucking missed you babe.'

But the trickster didn't respond. He was probably too tired to even acknowledge that Tony came back earlier, wrung out by the healing he performed a few hours prior on Clint.

Natasha was still a little baffled by that display of good will. Frankly she never expected him to come up with such an offer on his own. Before, when he sometimes healed any of them, it was usually thanks to Stark's persuasive skills, but even that mostly stopped after the inventor learned how strenuous it was for the god. Not to mention that there was no love lost between Loki and Clint, so the offer was even more surprising. Natasha wasn't sure what to think about it. The few times Loki left Stark's penthouse to mingle with the rest of the Avengers he was very civil and tried really hard to disregard some of the archer's taunts. One time it resulted in an epic screaming match between Tony and Clint, after which they both sulked like children for the remainder of the week.

Natasha knew that deep in his heart Clint was still afraid of Loki and the bravado and constant taunts were there to convince himself otherwise; she was certain that the god knew that too, but she wasn't sure if he genuinely wanted to improve his relationship with Clint for Tony's sake or was it a part of some elaborate plan to lull them all into thinking that he's on their side now, just so he could later strike when they least expected it. If so, he was actually succeeding, because Tony was literally smitten with him, at this point he would probably do almost anything the god would ask of him. Thor's view was biased from the start, but even Steve and Bruce liked the trickster quite a lot. And if she was going to be entirely honest with herself Natasha too had her weak moments. The god was very intelligent and had a vast knowledge about all kind of stuff. Once she found herself enjoying a discussion with Loki about small throwing knives and various techniques involved in using them efficiently in close combat. She had to berate herself later for going too much into detail and giving away some of her moves, but the general discussion was so interesting that she truly didn't notice at the time.

Natasha yawned broadly. The bug was mostly silent except some sighs and rustling sheets indicating that both Loki and Tony were asleep. She closed the laptop and looked at the clock on the wall behind her. It was almost 3:30 in the morning, but the day was very eventful and left her restless. Now she felt heavy standing up and stretching again, exhausted. The redhead decided she would check up on Clint and then finally go to sleep. It was about god damn time.

~

Tony was woken up by a passionate kiss. Yet again he felt like a damn Disney princess. But he couldn't really complain when his god of extreme sexiness straddled him and began ravaging his lips. The inventor hummed into the kiss and opened his mouth to invite Loki in. They kissed languidly, savoring the peaceful, intimate moment until Tony finally ran out of air.

'Wow, I need to get out of the country more often if this is how you're going to welcome me back,' the engineer chuckled when their lips parted.

Loki made a displeased sound in the back of his throat and bit Tony's collarbone as a sign of



protest.

'Don't,' the god whined lapping on the teeth marks with his tongue.

'I've missed you too,' Tony kissed the god's temple and at the same time ran his hands over the pale planes of Loki's sides settling on his hips. The trickster's wild hair tickled his nose so he braced himself and flipped them both over so that Loki landed on his back trapped under the inventor.

'Hey babe,' the billionaire purred right next to Loki's ear smiling when a shudder went over the god's body.

'Tony...' the trickster moaned breathlessly and wrapped a pair of sinfully long legs around the inventor's hips. He then arched his back from the bed and ground up keening softly with want. It was music to Tony's ears.

'Jesus,' the human panted, 'you should be illegal! Come here!'

Their lips melded against each other in another searing kiss and the last coherent thought the inventor's brain produced before it overheated with lust was: *I won't ever let you go!*

~

Two hours and thirty six minutes of vigorous workout between the sheets left them both sticky with sweat (and other bodily fluids) and totally exhausted, but extremely happy. Tony stretched out on top of the god and lazily sucked a mark on his collarbone unsuccessfully trying to leave a lasting impression. His own skin was dotted with red spots and teeth marks, but the god's stubbornly remained unblemished.

'Damn,' Tony grumbled watching as the hickey slowly faded away. 'That's so unfair.'

The trickster chuckled and lightly pecked him on the cheek.

'The effort counts?'

'Yeah thanks,' Tony peered up at the god's smiling face and frowned. It was too dark earlier to notice, but now when the sun was up and obnoxiously streaming molten lava through the windows the inventor noticed that Loki looked exhausted and it wasn't the good kind of *I had a lot of sex just now* exhausted, but more like *I haven't been sleeping and I overworked myself* sort. He looked paler than usual too.

'Babe?' Tony bit his lip not sure how to properly articulate his worries and not sound like an overprotective parent.

'Hmm?' Loki's fingers found their way into Tony's hair and started slowly massaging his scalp.

The inventor hesitated a moment, his gaze suddenly drawn to the black sigils under the immortal's skin. They moved frantically, amassing in the vicinity of the god's wrists as if there was a line there they just couldn't cross. It looked repulsive, but Tony knew it wasn't Loki's fault.

'Anthony?' The god drew himself higher on the pillows sensing the shift in mood.

'No, it's just... You look tired. You're still recovering from the fight with the robots?'

'No,' Loki sighed. There was no sense keeping a secret Tony would know about the second he'd step onto the common floor. 'I used it for healing yesterday.'

Silence followed his admission and Loki had to reach out a hand and lightly touch Tony's face to gauge his mood. 'It was necessary,' he added when the silence started to grow heavy.

'Why?' The inventor finally spoke, but his voice was loaded with emotions Loki had trouble reading.

'One of the constructs assaulted Barton and almost ripped his arm out. Without my assistance he would not be able to recover from this injury.' The god withheld his breath waiting for Tony to get angry and yell at him, but was surprised when the inventor only nodded.

'You... are not angry?' The trickster asked perplexed.

'Oh I'm angry alright, but I know that sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do. And I trust you. You wouldn't just recklessly throw yourself under the bus if it wasn't important.'

A thick lump of emotions swelled inside Loki's chest. Tony said he trusted him, words the god didn't hear very often. Even Thor never trusted him completely, less so now, but the inventor said it sincerely and without asking or wanting anything in return. Loki's throat suddenly constricted and the corners of his eyes stung. The onslaught of emotions overwhelmed him completely and he gathered the impossibly beautiful human closer to his chest.

'I love you,' the god managed to croak out, his lips hovering over Tony's temple peppering it with haste kisses. If Loki's damaged eyes could produce tears they would now be streaming down his cheeks. Instead he only sniffed and continued to kiss Tony's brow, nose and chin.

'I do not deserve you,' Loki finally whispered against the inventor's mouth, their breaths mingling.

'That is bullshit and you know it,' Tony replied with heat. The sudden outburst of affection surprised him for a moment, because Loki wasn't generally the sentimental type, but when he looked the god in the face the adoration he saw there made his own heart skip a beat. And it wasn't for the first time that he wondered how such two broken creatures like them could be in this surprisingly functioning relationship.

'As hard to believe as it sounds even you deserve to be happy. No, really, stop over thinking it. Just let yourself be happy for once!'

'I am,' Loki started reluctantly, 'very happy right now. Thank you.'

'Good,' Tony sighed pressing himself flat against the god's strong body. He was content to spend the whole day just like that, in bed with his favorite god and he said so.

*'Sorry to disrupt your plans sir,'* Jarvis chimed in suddenly, *'but doctor Steven Strange asked me to relay a message to you both.'*

'Yeah? What did he say?' Tony asked absentmindedly combing through Loki's hair with his fingers.

*'He wishes to meet again, as fast as possible.'*

'Did he say why?' The inventor tried to do a little braid in the god's glossy hair, but failed miserably.

*'Only that he will be leaving town shortly,'* the AI said.

'Oh,' Tony turned to Loki, 'what do you say? Up to make a trip to the Greenwich Village?'

'We might as well see what he wants,' the trickster shrugged, 'but right now I require breakfast in bed.'

'Oh pushy! Fine, I think I can manage unburned pancakes. Don't go anywhere,' Tony grunted lifting himself up from the bed. Maybe they finally would get some answers. This day started splendidly, it would be a shame to waste it, the inventor thought while whistling a cheerful tune, padding barefoot and bare-assed out of the bedroom.

~

'So you're going away for how long?' Tony asked Strange as their host guided them through the mansion. It kind of reminded him of his old family manor, high ceilings and arch windows draped with long, heavy curtains. He hasn't stepped a foot in that house in almost twenty years, but his memories of it were still vivid and bittersweet. His mother's lovely voice calling him for dinner, followed by Howard's angry shouts when he didn't perform as good as it was expected of him. Later his father's loud, demanding and always displeased voice became more prominent, drowning out Maria's calm words. Tony shuddered involuntarily when the memories became darker, more hazy, blurred by alcohol and drugs as the house became more like a hotel where he sometimes swung by between one wild party and another. The inventor inhaled deeply, now was not the time to reminisce of old days, Howard wasn't here anymore to glare disapprovingly at him. Now he had people that actually cared about him. The engineer reached out a hand and entwined his fingers with Loki's. The god's quiet presence grounded him.

'I can't say precisely, a couple of months perhaps,' Strange replied to a question Tony managed to forget he even asked. The doctor finally stopped in front of large wooden door and swung one wing wide open to invite his guests in. They ended up in a spacious study all wood and soft carpets. Most of the walls were covered in bookshelves bending under countless books. Warm, golden light streamed from the wall lamps bathing the study in soft shadows. The Sorcerer Supreme motioned for them to sit on one of the luxurious couches.

'As I said,' Strange started, sitting behind a grand oak desk, 'I have a business to attend elsewhere, but I would like to study your bindings in my free time, so I need to take a better look at them and memorize what I can. If you could...' the sorcerer made an aborted gesture with his hand, but remembered that the god couldn't see it, 'undress.'

So Loki stood up and shrugged off his perfectly fitting gray cardigan and undershirt and Tony marveled for a moment how the soft lamp light accented the god's features.

'They behave different today,' the doctor stated as he rounded the desk, his brow creased as he studied the sigils intensely.

'Yes. I almost depleted my reserves yesterday,' Loki admitted tossing Tony his clothes. Strange lifted one of his arms and cautiously touched the blackened skin, but the sigils did not react as they did to Tony's touch.

'So you can still conjure? Fascinating.'

It took the sorcerer a better part of the afternoon to memorize the patterns of the spell, Tony couldn't even distinguish in the black ink, before he was satisfied. At some point his servant brought them coffee (tea for Loki) and some sweets as they talked about the increase of wannabe villains that started terrorizing many of the big cities throughout the country.

'Take for example the recent attack on D.C.,' Tony said waving his fork around, 'a bunch of hi-tech bots and no villain boasts how they are more superior than anything the world had ever seen, not

that they were, mind you, I still could built better with my eyes closed, but the point is we still don't know who is behind the attack.'

'And they were imbued with magic,' Loki added, 'but I was told there are but a few sorcerers on Midgard.'

'Not that many, I grand you that,' Strange nodded puffing his chest out a bit, 'science and magic...' he murmured to himself. 'Only one name comes to my mind, but he shouldn't have any need to attack here, he's not from around.'

'Who?' Tony asked excited, maybe they could get at least a lead to investigate.

'His name is Victor von Doom and he's the sovereign leader of a small country in Eastern Europe called Latveria. As far as I know he has some gifts, but I was never concerned enough to investigate.'

'The magic I detected felt raw, it must have been self-taught,' Loki added, this midgardian sorcerer made him curious.

'That may be likely, I know nothing more about him than some rumors,' the doctor nodded sagely.

It was worth a check, Tony mused waiting for the mages to finish the examination. He performed a quick internet search through Jarvis, but there was not much to discover about this Doom. Apparently he ruled with a heavy hand, but his small domain was prospering. There was no mention of his hocus pocus anywhere, but it wasn't really unusual.

Tony pocketed his phone and made a mental note to dig through S.H.I.E.L.D. servers later for more info. For now he concentrated on Loki's face as he discussed some magical problem with Strange. You could see how passionate he was about his magic, so the inventor made another mental note to ask Loki more about his powers and abilities, with maybe small demonstrations, because if you disregarded the fact that he screwed with the laws of physics that were holy to the inventor it was really fascinating to watch and listen to the god. *Later*, Tony thought to himself with a soft smile, maybe in bed after a round or two of mind-blowing sex. Yes, that was a good plan. Now he just had to wait patiently for the wonder pair to finish their unscientific discussion.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 25

'Move your fingers, good, now wrist. Yes, excellent. Does it feel stiff?' Loki asked bending over the armchair.

'No,' Clint grumbled. The god underwent two healing sessions with him to try and repair the damage the dumb bot made and the archer wasn't too happy about it. He now felt like he owed the fucker something even if the god insisted they were even at last. Damn, it was so unfair! Clint wanted to rage and shout at the trickster, call him names like he used to, but it didn't feel right. He didn't want to be grateful, but to be honest after hearing the doctor's diagnosis he almost wanted to grab Tasha's gun and point it at his temple. The archery was everything he had, without it he was nothing, he definitely wouldn't be able to remain an Avenger and the past two years were the best of his entire life. So when Loki came to offer him help he wanted to jump off the bed and even beg to be healed, but then his brain reminded him that it would be almost like that time when he was enthralled to Loki and the thought alone almost made him gag. So he did the only rational (to him) thing: he refused and called the god names, it was a defense mechanism really, but somewhere deep in his chest he felt he was making a huge mistake. Then again, he could always count on Natasha to correct his fuck ups. She looked at him with cold and calculating glare and in vivid language told him what a pile of shit he was for refusing such an offer. So in the end Clint relented and let himself be healed by the god that he once was a slave off.

Thank god (but not you Loki, fuck off) the procedure wasn't really that bad, well for him, because he had to be put under anesthesia, but overall when he woke up the god wasn't even there and his mangled hand felt a thousand times better. He heard from Natasha and Bruce though that Loki almost fainted over the job and it lit a small spark of joy in his chest to know that the god had it hard, but it died pretty quickly, because generally Clint didn't want anyone to suffer because of him.

But that fucker, THAT FUCKER cut the nerve connections in his hand from the shoulder down so Clint wouldn't be able to move the hand and undo the healing the god performed. So when the archer woke up after the first session and couldn't feel his arm AT ALL he freaked out. It took Natasha good twenty minutes to calm him down and it involved a few stinging slaps to the face. When he finally calmed down enough to listen she and Bruce explained why the god deemed it necessary to do so. Apparently he had too little juice to finish the healing in one go so he did as much as he could, but the tissue was now vulnerable and tender, even the smallest movement could tear it apart forcing the god to repair it again the next day. It made some sense, but the feeling of your arm being unresponsive, almost dead was the worst thing the archer ever experienced, well right next to the whole mind control thing. Clint had to repeatedly remind himself that it would be fixed and that it wasn't some kind of malicious prank (although he had trouble convincing himself



sometimes).

Thank god (fuck you Loki) the trickster came back next evening to finish the job. Clint was almost out thanks to the sedation, but his sharp hawk eyes managed to register the god's paler than normal complexion and dark shadows under his eyes. What he didn't expect to see was Stark's ugly mug peeking over the god's shoulder with his brow furrowed and displeased twist to his mouth. Clint couldn't understand what they talked about, it sounded like a bunch of alien crap from some low budget sci-fi movie and soon after the sedatives claimed him.

The next time he woke up only Natasha was around dozing in the armchair near the window. The archer sat up still groggy from the meds and didn't even register at first that he was supporting himself with his newly healed arm and then it clicked and Clint looked at it with awe. It felt like new, no ache, no nothing. He experimentally moved his fingers and they felt a little tingly, but overall okay. The archer flopped down on the bed with a giddy smile, maybe he would let Loki off the hook... just a little. Barton laughed aloud waking Natasha in the process. When he heard her stir he turned towards her with a goofy smile plastered to his face.

'I won't have to commission for a hook to be made for my hand,' he started laughing. The redhead only rolled her eyes exasperated.

~

The next day Loki came again to inspect the archer's arm and was greeted by an absurd scene: Clint balancing on the backrest of a chair throwing small darts all over the place with Natasha sitting on the floor in a sun patch reading a book.

'What d'ya want Rudolph?' Hawkeye exclaimed somersaulting down from his perch. Loki lifted an eyebrow, he understood that reference, Stark sometimes used it too and explained it to him once, but that it was used by the archer was unexpected.

'I came to see if everything was in order, but I have my answer now so I will take my leave,' the god said and was about to backtrack into the elevator. He was still uncomfortable in the assassin duo company and wasn't delusional to think that they would express their undying love and gratitude after this one effort, so there was no reason to linger, obviously Barton was in a great condition once again.

'Wait,' the trickster heard the agent's call. 'Uh I umm wanna talk to you for a moment... If that's okay.'

'I'll go to the gym,' Natasha promptly stood up and strode straight to the elevator.

When the doors closed behind her Loki faced the archer and waited.

'I... you know, wanted to erm thank you for this,' he waved his right hand around.

'If you'll move it so much it will fall off,' the god deadpanned, his voice grave.

'WHAT?!' Clint squeaked and hugged his newly fixed arm close to his body. Loki wished he could see the spy's expression.

'I jest Barton,' the trickster rolled his unseeing eyes, but added with a serious voice: 'It will go limp.'

'Lokiii!'

The god burst out laughing and had to grip the wall not to keel over. Suddenly a cushion hit him in

the face.

'You fucker,' Clint hissed, but there was no malice in his voice and after a moment of hesitation added: 'Thanks man, I don't know what I would have done otherwise.' The archer scratched his neck embarrassed, he knew he wasn't the most pleasant company to the god and deep in his heart was really grateful to Loki.

The trickster picked up the cushion, his face becoming serious.

'You are welcome, but do try next time to defend yourself better, it took a lot of energy to fix you and I would not want to repeat it.'

'Noted,' Barton said sourly.

'Good,' Loki grinned and swift like a serpent hauled the cushion at the archer hitting him straight in the face in retaliation. He was at the elevator a second later.

'Close it Jarvis.'

'*Yes sir.*'

'I still hate you!' Clint's shout reached him in the cab before the doors shut entirely.

~

'How did it go?' Tony asked as soon as Loki set a foot in the workshop.

'Rather peacefully I must admit, although I got hit in the face with a cushion.'

'What?' Tony managed to drop the wrench he was fiddling with.

'I hit back,' the god chuckled as he strode between the workbenches towards his lover. Stark marveled at the change the trickster went through since he and Thor first landed here over eight months ago. At the beginning the younger god was an wreck and he didn't mean physically, Loki's mental state was truly bad. He was plagued with paranoia and nightmares, he anticipated that enemies (in this case the Avengers) would strike at him from every corner, or even poison his food. And now look at him: confident and gorgeous. Even with the scars marring his visage he looked better than during the invasion of New York. His cheeks were fuller (but the beautiful cheekbones were still prominent), hair soft and glossy. And the smile! Tony could write books about that smile and mouth, silver tongue in particular. Sometimes when Loki beamed at him a genuine happy smile Tony's knees would turn into a mush and his chest around the arc reactor would start tingling with this weird feeling Tony had trouble describing. It didn't happen often enough for the inventor's liking, but when it did it was fantastic.

'I just imagined,' the billionaire barked out a laugh, 'you gluing small, white feathers to Barton's body. He could become a real bird then!'

Loki grinned at him and lightly shoved at his shoulder.

'Agent Romanoff would declare a bloody vendetta against me.'

'No, but imagine Clint running around the tower all in feathers and bucking like a chicken!' Tony whizzed with laughter.

Loki assumed a facial expression indicating deep thinking, but the corners of his mouth quirked up.

'I think,' he drawled, 'it is not much different from what he does normally.'

'True!' And they both burst out with heartfelt laughter.

~

Sometime later when they finally managed to calm down Loki sat up straight in his chair and asked with a serious face: 'Anthony?'

'Yes Snowflake?'

The inventor was busy tweaking the infrared vision in his helmet. It sometimes malfunctioned without a reason and Tony couldn't have that.

The god hesitated for a moment gathering his thoughts.

'I would like to meet with this Victor von Doom.'

'Ah fuck!' The engineer burned his finger with the soldering iron. He put the tool away and faced the god. There wasn't a hint of a joke present in his expression, the immortal was dead serious.

'Why?'

'I am weary of this all. I suffocate being enclosed in the same space for months, I feel like a cripple, a shadow of myself. I am useless and at the same time I am a danger to you,' the god admitted twisting the hem of his t-shirt between his fingers. 'I wish to once again be a master of myself and I wish to see you,' he almost whispered the last part.

'Fury would do a cartwheel if he could hear you now, you know. It's conspiring with a criminal and he could lock you up for good,' Tony sighed sucking the burned finger.

'I do not want to discuss world domination with him! I just wish to gain my powers back!' The god stood up and started pacing. 'Why do I have to abide to a rule of some lowly mortal! He is nothing to me, but a bug unworthy of my attention!' Loki burst out frustrated. 'Why pray tell must I bow my head before him and fear him? I am a god!' Enraged the god struck one of Tony's many racks and all the canisters and bars of metal fell to the floor. He was shaking with anger, breathing fast and uneven.

'Am I not a lowly mortal too then?' Tony asked calmly, seemingly unfazed by the outburst.

Loki spun around, face stricken and made a step towards his lover. His foot collided with one of the items littering the ground and it emitted a whining, high pitched beeping sound.

'Well?' The engineer asked.

'I did not...'

'Sir,' Jarvis interjected. There was unusual urgency in his voice.

'What is it J?' Tony sighed eyeing the god. Loki stood a couple of steps away, eyes downcast and biting his lower lip, he looked crushed.

An array of holographic displays sprang to life around the inventor as he stood up and went to the god. He could understand Loki's frustration, but it hurt being referred to as a lowly mortal and nothing, even if indirectly.

'Anthony,' the immortal whispered when he sensed the billionaire's presence close by. He made another step forward and slowly, as if he wasn't sure if he was allowed, wrapped his arms around his lover's shorter frame. Tony murmured soothing words to the god and gently combed his raven-black hair.

'Sir, if you could take a moment to look...' Jarvis urged. Tony hesitantly disentangled himself from the god, but still held his hand and peered at the holoscreens.

'What have you got for me buddy?'

Words started to flash across the screen and Tony's eyes widened. To any other observant it would look like a bunch of unfinished projects and data, but in reality it was a code telling Tony that it wasn't safe to talk freely in the workshop because Jarvis detected unidentified spying equipment.

'Wow this looks bad Jarvis, do some cleanup, scan the remaining plans and send me the results later,' Tony cocked his head to the side as if everything was alright, but the hand gripping Loki's squeezed harder at the immortal's flesh. 'I think both me and Loki need some fresh air.'

He tugged the god towards the exit. On the outside the inventor managed to uphold his flippant appearance and good humor, but on the inside he was boiling with rage.

'I'm hungry, wanna eat something?' Stark asked the god, a wide smile still plastered to his face. Without waiting for an answer he continued to babble.

'I crave pizza, real Italian pizza. Yeah, we should go out and get some. It's not the same when you have to heat it up again.'

When they reached the elevator the billionaire put his hand on the small of Loki's back and the god felt how it trembled. Something was wrong, but he couldn't tell what. They rode down in silence and when they were exiting the cab Tony threw a quick *keep me posted* at Jarvis and they were off.

~

They ended up on a park bench somewhere in the middle of Central Park. The summer was just around the corner and one could feel it in the air, even if the sun was almost setting it was still very pleasant. A warm breeze ruffled through the god's hair as he waited for the inventor to say something. If Stark wanted he would tell him what it was.

A melody from Tony's pocket startled them both, it was a message from Jarvis, Loki recognized the sound. The inventor took out the device, read the message and let out a blue streak of curses.

'Those sons of bitches!' He growled. 'In the workshop AND the penthouse?' He asked the phone. 'Nothing? No, I don't believe it was the only one; it's just that it has to be a frequency your sensors can't detect. Can you estimate when it was installed? Yeah, that's what I thought too, it fits doesn't it?' Stark sighed. Loki bumped their shoulders together and Tony turned towards him.

'What happened?'

'Someone bugged the workshop, but except the one you stepped on Jarvis is unable to detect more, yet I refuse to believe it was the only one,' Tony explained carding a hand through his hair.

'Bugged?' The god frowned, that particular use of that word didn't make sense to him, unless the All-Speak failed to translate it properly.

'Yeah, they installed small devices and were then able to listen to everything we said.'

'They?' The notion that someone could hear everything they told each other was very unsettling.

'Jarvis thinks that the only time someone could access the workshop without him noticing would be during the reparations of the outer wall when he was still offline.' Tony's tone was hollow, tired.

'Who could have done that?' The god asked, he worried about Tony; an unidentified enemy managed to infiltrate his fortress and remained undetected for months, what if there was an assassin in waiting?

Stark laughed mirthlessly.

'Can't you tell? Come on Bambi, we have work to do. I have to think up a method to find the other bugs.'

~

After a whole night of intense work Tony strolled into the kitchen, tired and irritated and dumped the dismantled bugs and cameras on the table right in front of Natasha.

'Care to explain?' He growled.

Just then he noticed that they were all there, the whole team. His mind supplied that it was probably breakfast time or something like that. Steve was at the stove poking things on the pan with a wooden spatula. It even smelled nice, but Tony was too busy seething to care.

Natasha looked at him dispassionately and shrugged.

'Fury's orders. We had to have surveillance,' she explained unfazed by his anger.

'You had to have surveillance?' He echoed not believing what he heard. 'In my bedroom and bathroom?! What did you think we would do, build a weapon of mass destruction out of soap and cotton buds?!' Tony slammed his right hand on the kitchen table (sometime during the search late at night he managed to cut his palm on a stray scrap of sharp metal and didn't even notice when it started bleeding again). They shared secrets, he said he loved Loki, it was their moment and their alone. He felt violated, imagining the whole Helicarrier watching him confess to the god, eating popcorn and snickering. And Loki's secrets? They had no right to know any of those.

They were all staring at him now and Tony just wanted to destroy something, preferably Fury's only working eye. His knuckles turned white and he breathed hard.

'So those mechanical spiders were only a distraction for us to leave the tower so S.H.I.E.L.D. could attack Jarvis to take him offline so you could bug my place?' When Natasha didn't answer he continued through gritted teeth. 'Do you have any idea how hard it was for me to get through to Loki? Do you know what shit load of crap he went through? Do you even care at all? Or is he just your mission?' Somewhere in the background Cap shuffled uncomfortably, but Tony's eyes were on Natasha.

'Was it also you who stole my workshop's plans and gave them to Fury to prepare the attack?' This time he shot blindly, but it made sense, she was the only one who could pull it through, and Jarvis didn't find any firewall breaches on his end so it must have been a paper copy.

Natasha actually looked ashamed, but the engineer was at this point unwilling to believe anything.

'S.H.I.E.L.D. has to assess any potential threats. You know that, yet you refuse to share...'



'Did it occur to you what S.H.I.E.L.D. could do with my technology? Did you know I fucking had plutonium in that lab?!!'

The whole kitchen was entirely still, they probably didn't even breath watching Tony shout, it didn't happen often.

Once, they were a team, maybe a little dysfunctional, but they trusted each other. Now they were nothing. Tony wanted to cry or get wasted so he could for a moment forget all the troubles - Loki's condition, his arc reactor losing power, S.H.I.E.L.D. snooping around. It was almost too much, he was drained, desperate for help for himself and Loki, but apparently there was no one he could trust with anything anymore.

He was so tired of this bullshit.

'Tell Fury,' he sighed, 'that I am quitting the Avengers, you have two weeks to remove yourself from my tower. I'm taking Loki to Malibu, and if I'll see even a glimpse of any S.H.I.E.L.D. agents I will sue you for trespassing and anything I can only think off.'

A cacophony of protests rose all around him, but he didn't care. That was the last straw and he had enough.

Tony left the kitchen without even looking back at his former teammates.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 26

When Stark left, a ringing silence fell over the kitchen. All eyes were focused on Natasha and her unperturbed expression, but the assassin said nothing and just sipped her coffee, not meeting anyone's gaze.

'Well, that was an overreaction, considering Jarvis sees and hears everything,' Clint started lamely, not knowing what else to say.

*'That is incorrect sir,' the ever vigilant AI said, 'your private quarters are only equipped with motion and voice detection sensors, additionally no data is stored unless the owner expresses a wish for it to be otherwise. Mister Stark values your privacy,'* the AI deadpanned, his voice displaying a range of emotions usually reserved for humans.

'Oh...' Barton pushed some carrots around his plate that Steve insisted were healthy for him.

'I think you and director Fury went overboard this time,' the Captain sighed dumping the rest of the steamed vegetables on Natasha's plate.

'We couldn't just leave Loki prowling around the tower unsupervised,' the redhead shrugged; suddenly she lost all her appetite. 'What if he managed to take control over Stark and turn him against us? You know how dangerous he could be, you met Howard.'

'Yes, maybe, but was the attack necessary? They both got hurt badly Natasha, if not for Loki Tony might have been crippled!'

'If not for Loki, the attack wouldn't be required. But that was... a miscalculation. Fury wanted a team and there were volunteers, some very eager. We didn't think much about it at the time, but the agent leading the team apparently lost loved ones in the invasion,' the spy explained.

A heavy silence fell over the kitchen once again.

'Still, it was unfair of you to plant those devices in Tony's living quarters,' Steve continued bend over the sink vigorously scrubbing the pan. The thought nagged at him, he believed they were a team and trust was a fundamental factor especially on the battlefield, without it one of them could get killed.

'And what was I supposed to do?' Natasha banged her hand flat on the table, it was tiresome being verbally attacked on all fronts. 'Let some other eager agent monitor them? You could be damn certain that Fury would find a way to keep an eye on them, with or without my help. Maybe he would even appoint a whole department to go through every word those two would say. This way I was the one in charge, I controlled the information flow between S.H.I.E.L.D. and the tower. Or would you rather let Fury detain Loki and keep him locked in some dark cell? How would that be better from what they did on Asgard?'

'But Tony wouldn't let...' Bruce started.

'No,' she brutally interrupted, 'he wouldn't let Fury take the trickster, but he's not indestructible and the director doesn't play fair. He could destroy Stark and in retaliation Stark would destroy him and the whole S.H.I.E.L.D. In the worst case scenario there could even be a civil war, all because those two morons couldn't come up with a compromise.'

Natasha's cheeks were slightly pink when she finished her rant. After she fell silent and looked at them defiantly no one uttered another word of protest. When the silence started to become uncomfortable again Thor stood up smoothly, went around the kitchen table and planted his big, heavy hand firmly on Natasha's shoulder.

'Thank you,' he said with gratitude, 'for thinking ahead and, even if indirectly, taking care of my little brother. I am sure he would applaud your choices if he were aware of them.'

'Thanks,' the spy replied a bit stiffly, at first anticipating a reprimand from the blond god.

'Well that being taken care off... What are we gonna do about the eviction notice we've just been handed?' Clint asked chewing a strip of bacon.

'I will talk to Tony,' Steve sighed, it would probably turn into a shouting match, but he had to try to pacify the genius. The captain dried his hands on a cloth and asked the room at large.

'Jarvis? Is Tony in the penthouse or the workshop?'

*'I'm not authorized to provide you with any information regarding Mister Stark sir, I'm sorry.'*

Steve grimaced; the situation was bad if Tony revoked their access to Jarvis so quickly.

*'But,' the AI continued hesitantly, 'if you would go by the penthouse there is a much bigger possibility of encountering mister Stark there than in the workshop.'*

'Thanks Jarvis,' the soldier nodded.

*'You are welcome sir.'*

~

Tony wished he could slam the elevator doors, but no such luck, they were designed to slide very smoothly. Instead he stomped loudly, enraged, through the corridor and straight to the vast open-spaced living room. The last time he felt like that was after he learned of Obie dealing weapons to the terrorists. He was buzzing with pent up energy and couldn't even discern what he was feeling exactly; was it rage, hurt, betrayal or just disappointment?

Not thinking much he went straight to the bar, poured himself two fingers of scotch and downed it neat instantly refilling the tumbler and repeating the procedure. He was about to drink the third one when a cold hand stopped his from lifting the glass.

Tony jumped startled at the sudden touch, he was so absorbed in his grim thoughts he forgot that he wasn't alone like every other time when someone betrayed him.

'Enough,' Loki whispered. He had abundant experience from dealing with Thor to know how it would end and he wasn't in the mood to deal with his lover's drunken rage.

Stark looked at the god briefly and slammed the carafe down on the counter. There was no use

arguing and besides he had things to do.

'Jarvis revoke all access privileges to all the Avengers, starting now they have level 6 clearance,' Tony barked out briskly and started pacing around, thinking. As far as he was aware he didn't have any appointments planned and Pepper was still in London finishing the arc reactor deal, so even the shareholders meetings were postponed.

*'It is done sir.'*

'Good, now charter us a plane. Is the house in Malibu finished?' Tony stopped for a moment and looked out through the grand window. He hasn't visited Malibu since Mandarin's attack. The house he knew so well was no more. Now there stood a new one, better and more technologically advanced, yet foreign. But maybe it was for the best, there were some traumatic memories associated with that place the inventor would rather forget about and he could forge new ones in the new house. With Loki. A clean slate. That sounded about right. They could christen the place with dirty and steamy sex on every surface available.

*'The renovation is complete, only the pantry requires restocking,'* the AI answered helpfully.

'Clothes and all the small necessities I always forget about?'

*'No sir.'*

'Then do something about it, I want it to be habitable by the time my plane lands.'

Stark moved towards the sofa, he knew he left his StarkPad there somewhere and there was a lot of work to be done.

'Is it wise to leave in anger like that?' Loki asked suddenly.

'I don't care if it's wise, I just can't be here anymore. And you wanted a change too,' Tony pointed out.

'That is true, but what about your duties? Can you just abandon them, abandon the Iron man?' Loki walked towards the mortal slowly, like to a scared animal, wary not to frighten it further.

'I am not abandoning anything,' Stark spat glaring at the trickster, 'I am Iron man!'

Loki's hands found the inventor's forearms and slowly moved up, caressing the sun-kissed skin. He could feel the tension radiating from the man, the taunt muscles quivered under his fingertips.

'You are running away love,' the god murmured. He wished he could look into Tony's eyes to gauge his mental state better.

The engineer barked out a sharp laugh and moved away from the god.

'This is what I'm best at Snowflake, drown my problems in booze and run away. That's what I really am: a coward and a drunk!'

Tony's voice cracked and he felt like shit. He craved to get wasted and forget the now familiar pain, to just not think for a while. He prowled the open space like a caged animal, he needed to be away from here or else he would do something stupid. Well, he will probably do something stupid anyway...

Loki caught him mid-step, easily halting his prowl. He looked furious.

'You are many a thing Tony Stark, but coward is not one of them.'

'Babe...' the billionaire's voice cracked suddenly when the god's strong arms closed around him in a tight embrace. His throat constricted and something akin to a sob tore itself straight from Tony's chest. Setting his head on Loki's shoulder the inventor closed his eyes and inhaled the trickster's distinct scent - a combination of cold winter morning air and Tony's citrus body wash. Irrationally he felt safe in an embrace of an alien god, a fallen prince, a trickster and a liar, but his trickster and his liar.

Loki rocked him slowly as the human's body shook with distress and suppressed emotions. They stayed like that for a while until Tony calmed down enough to look the trickster in the face.

'Let's get the hell out of here,' the inventor sighed tiredly. His head was pounding and the vile taste of bile still lingered on his tongue. The god pecked his forehead and nodded.

'Let's.'

~

'Sir, Captain Rogers is here to see you,' Jarvis announced some time later.

'Busy,' Tony grunted unsuccessfully trying to close a suitcase haphazardly stuffed with clothes. Somehow the bare necessities they planned on taking turned into a monstrous luggage. Usually Pepper helped him pack, she knew the things he never paid attention to, like what kind of sunscreen would a very fair person need. The inventor had no clue, but always helpful Jarvis managed to solve that riddle for him.

'He said he won't leave until you'll talk to him sir.'

'Well then wish him a good night, because I don't plan to.'

Stark finally managed to close the case without damaging the locks and sat on it for good measure.

'Please let him in Jarvis,' Loki stood up from the recliner he was sprawled over and went to his lover.

'No, don't,' Tony ordered and then looked at the trickster, 'why aren't you more upset over this by the way? They heard everything we said!'

The god burrowed his nimble fingers in the inventor's hair and scratched lightly. Tony's head rested on Loki's hip and he closed his eyes relishing the feeling.

'Asgard has a guardian called Heimdall and he can see everything that happens in the Nine Realms, not simultaneously of course, but we... the Aesir are used to the notion that there is someone that watches constantly,' the god shrugged.

Tony's head jerked away from under Loki's hand and he scowled at the immortal.

'So you're telling me there is a guy out there that could be watching us right now? Wait, he could watch us during sex? Well, that's disturbing.'

Loki chuckled and bent down to plant a soft kiss on his lover's lips.

'Then maybe next time we'll make a show he won't easily forget?' He whispered sultry against Stark's mouth.



'Kinky!'

The god smiled lasciviously, but it faded quickly.

'Talk to the Captain love, I am sure he wishes to explain.'

'Fine, you master manipulator, let him in Jarvis!'

The trickster was about to move away when Tony's hand shot out suddenly grabbing him by the t-shirt and tugging down onto the inventor's lap. Loki cursed loosing balance and they both ended sprawled over the luggage. Steve found them on the floor giggling like five year olds.

'Tony can we talk?' He asked unsure how the billionaire would react, he was shouting at them not even an hour ago and now he was rolling on the floor like a kid.

'Yeah, just do it quickly, we have still some stuff to pack.'

'Don't quit the Avengers. We need you!' Steve pleaded, anxiety written all over his face. 'What Natasha did was wrong, but don't let the people we are trying to protect suffer because of that. You are a valuable member of the Avengers and it would be a terrible loss if you were to quit,' he said all in one breath and waited for Stark's reaction. Tony took one glance at his face all sincere and open, the blue baby eyes begging silently for him to reconsider. The engineer couldn't help it, he burst out laughing again, but it quickly morphed into a mirthless chuckle.

'Wow that was convincing. You could be a top notch salesman with those puppy eyes, but I don't care. S.H.I.E.L.D. fucked up, let them feel the fallout.'

'Yes, that's true, but it won't be S.H.I.E.L.D. that would suffer from your absence, but the people. Maybe during another attack by Hydra there would be civilians trapped in a burning building and none of us would be able to save them, but you. Or there would be a bomb left by some maniac and none of us is remotely as good with electronics as you. You are a superhero, you have a duty to the people.'

Tony grimaced hearing that.

'I'm not a hero Steve, I'm just a guy with cool toys and lots of money.'

They were still sitting on the floor, he and Loki and the Captain reached out a hand to help the inventor up.

'Of course you are a hero, you saved a lot of lives!' Rogers protested. Since their first meeting on the Helicarrier and the heated argument, Steve developed a lot of respect towards the inventor. He was ashamed that his first assessment of Tony was based on a few snippets of information and one glance at the man. Since then he managed to get to know him better, the good and the bad side, and he was really grateful to have someone like him on the team; he was an invaluable asset and a great friend.

'And I ended more! Or helped to.'

Stark spun on his heel and be-lined towards the bar again, he was just about to pour himself another glass of scotch, the good mood he had moments ago now all gone, but one glance at Loki stooped him. Instead he sighed and sat on the nearest bar stool.

'I was used enough times in my life, I won't let S.H.I.E.L.D. do it again.'

'I know; I don't want that too. We could cut ties with S.H.I.E.L.D. but still do what we do best, help others! Fury is trying to control everyone, but he went too far this time. It's not all right, when you can't even feel safe in your own house. I understand that you are mad and righteously so, but please consider this option: Avengers out of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s influence. The world is changing and there are other people who could join us and help protect the innocents.'

Steve put a hand on Tony's shoulder and squeezed lightly.

'What, you want to open a school like Xavier?' Stark snorted. 'I'll think about it Steve, but not right now. I need a break, we need a break. You guys can stay at the tower; just tell the wonder twins that they need to sort their priorities first. We'll be going to Malibu for some time, a vacation of sorts.'

'I understand,' Rodgers nodded. He glanced at Loki, who in the meantime moved from the floor to his recliner again. 'Rest and have fun guys. See you around.' He waved at Tony and then he was gone, leaving the two to finish packing, or more precisely Tony, because Loki stated with a lofty voice (and poorly concealed smirk) that the task was beneath him and that Stark was more than capable of doing it himself. In retaliation the inventor threw a pair of his boxer-briefs at him. After that grave insult a true garment war began and the packing had to be postponed for a while until finally Tony capitulated to general Laufeyson's underhanded kissing tactics.

~

'Sir,' agent Hill approached the director who was overseeing the Helicarrier's busy deck. The moon shone over the reflective panels and illuminated the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents scurrying around carrying out orders. The agency was a like a well-oiled machine, everything worked as it should and every cog had it part to play. 'The marks had left Manhattan.'

'Finally.'

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 27

'Welcome to casa de Stark!' Tony laughed stepping through the threshold of his new-old home. Curiously glancing around he guided Loki by the hand into the spacious interior. It looked different, but somehow almost the same, as if someone moved all the furniture 5 centimeters to the left.

He personally designed the plans for the new mansion, all top notch technology and materials, with a state-of-the-art workshop powered by clean energy and with Jarvis in every possible corner.

Tony dropped the suitcase with the bare necessities they'd be needing tonight (the rest would be delivered tomorrow morning) and frowned. The interior of the main living room looked like it had been taken straight from a catalogue, everything new, modern and trendy, but lacking a personal touch, it seemed cold.

'Jarvis, buddy are you there?' Tony murmured, an irrational fear whispering in his mind that the AI - his friend, couldn't hear him.

*'Always sir.'*

A small sigh of relief escaped the inventor's lips and he smiled brightly.

'Great!'

With Loki's hand still in his Tony stepped towards the big sliding doors leading to the patio and opened them inviting in some warm evening breeze.

'I'm starving babe, you?' He glanced at the god over his shoulder.

'Famished.'

'Yeah, thought so. Jarvis be a dear and order us dinner.'

*'You have something special in mind sir?'* the AI asked attentively.

'Nah, surprise us.'

*'As you wish.'*

The trickster's hand finally slipped from his and Loki went past him as if hypnotized, his unseeing eyes locked on the ocean. He stopped near the edge and stood frozen in spot, longing plain on his face.

'Babe?' Tony inquired quietly not certain of the immortal's reaction. Maybe it was nothing, or maybe the sound of the waves crashing on the shore reminded him of something from his long past.

'I was not aware how badly I missed the sound of the waves,' Loki sighed finally and closed his eyes relishing the moment. 'One could always hear it in Asgard.'

'So Asgard lays on the shore huh? I bet that when you were younger you and Thor went skinny-dipping in the middle of the night!'

'The City Eternal does not lay on a shore,' the god shook his head amused anticipating Tony's reaction. 'It is surrounded by the everlasting ocean.'

'So it's an island?'

'No,' Loki laughed imagining his lover's confused face, 'well yes, but not how you understand it. Asgard is not like Midgard... Earth. It is not a globe. Its surface is mostly flat with a mountain range on the horizon. Suspended in space it floats over the branches of *Yggdrasil*.'

'You're shitting me!' Tony exclaimed personally offended by the big fuck you to the laws of physics. 'How is that even possible? How the hell does gravity work there? And atmosphere, do you guys even have atmosphere?! Please tell me Asgard isn't raiding on the back of a giant sea turtle?'

The god just shrugged smirking.

'I am positive there is no sea creature underneath it, why would there be? The only beast roaming the branches of the World Tree is *Níðhöggr* and he is far away, near the roots, in Niflheim.'

'Please stop talking, I think my brain is going to implode,' Tony glanced at his lover. 'You're making fun of me aren't you?'

'It is all true,' Loki shook his head and his smile faded. 'You remember when I told you about destruction of the Bifrost?'

'Yes... Thor struck it with his magical Nokia on a stick and it broke.'

'Indeed, the dome housing the device controlling the bridge was situated far away from the city, at the edge of the ocean and over the void. This is why when I... fell I didn't end up in the water.' The god looked thoughtful for a moment and when he spoke again it was merely a whisper. 'Maybe it would have been better if I drowned instead ending in the void.'

A fist connected with his jaw and send him tumbling onto the marble floor. It was so unexpected that Loki didn't even have time to protect himself.

'Never...' Tony panted, his voice shaking hard. 'Never say that again. Drowning... is the ugh! Fuck!' The inventor hissed cradling the battered fist to his chest. 'Don't you dare think it would have been better!'

An alarm went inside Loki's head and he quickly scrambled to his feet to embrace his shaking lover. The god's hands encircled Tony's torso from behind and Loki's head rested on the inventor's shoulder.

'Sorry, I'm so sorry,' he whispered against the billionaire's warm skin.

He suddenly remembered what Barton once told him: tortured, bitten and drowned by his captors' unforgiving hands. If he could he would hunt every single one of those who hurt his lover and pay them in kind. Instead he peppered Tony's exposed throat with soft, fleeting kisses until the engineer's body relaxed in his embrace and became pliant. The sound of the waves wasn't as comforting anymore.

~

The dinner was oddly quiet. Tony ate mechanically not feeling any taste; just bite, chew and swallow. His mind was adrift, caught between the sensation of suffocating, head kept underwater by strong hands, and the helplessness he felt in the void, the knowledge that the air supply in the suit would last ninety seconds tops. Was this how he would end? Suffocated? He felt breathless just thinking about it.

He had to make some kind of distressed sound because Loki was beside him in an instant whispering soothing nothings into his ear and kissing him again. Tony laughed brokenly, how was he supposed be strong for Loki when he couldn't even be strong for himself?

'We really are a fucked up pair. A traumatized god and a traumatized would-be hero. What more do you need for a total disaster?'

'I would not ask for anything more, I have everything I need,' Loki stated firmly cradling Tony's body closer to his chest. The inventor sagged against him and let himself be cuddled; it felt nice: relaxing and safe.

'What about your magic? You're giving up on it?' Tony asked twisting in the god's arms so that he could straddle his lap instead.

Loki sighed, his nimble fingers traveled to the billionaire's jaw to settle there, thumb on the bone near the ear.

'I am at a loss how to acquire it back. I thought I could bend the sigils and with some work break them, but it is not working. I am uncertain if they are this flexible or adaptive, but it does not work as I predicted. I... don't know what to do anymore,' Loki confessed resigned. He's been trying and trying even in the accursed jotun form sometimes, but it was no use, they would not break and he was out of ideas.

'Well,' Tony drawled, 'now that I have severed my connection with S.H.I.E.L.D. we could contact Doom. Maybe he will come up with something? Yeah, I think that's a good idea. Jarvis start a search on Victor von Doom, I need his location and phone number.'

*'At once sir.'*

'No, it is too risky, what if someone would learn about that meeting? Would you not get in trouble?' Loki asked concerned, resting his hands on the inventor's narrow hips caressing the warm skin just above the hem of Tony's pants.

'Nah, S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn't know that Doom was involved in the attack, we acquired that info by accident too. It's gonna be fine.' The billionaire waved Loki's concerns off with an impatient gesture.

*'I have completed your enquiry sir and you are in luck. Victor von Doom is scheduled to attend a conference in Las Vegas in three days.'*

'Splendid! You hear that Bambi, we won't have to travel half the world to meet with him, he's



coming to us!' Tony laughed delighted that for once things were this simple.

~

Next morning the billionaire woke up to a hand traveling slowly over his biceps. He hummed into the pillow and wanted to shift to face Loki and greet him properly, but the hand stopped him with a light squeeze and a moment later the god's cool lips descended upon his neck. The trickster then started kissing and lightly sucking the sensitive skin as his left hand made its way to Tony's abdomen and settled there to delicately caress the inventor's underbelly. A shiver went over Tony's body and he moaned into the pillow, he was growing hard fast and he needed to feel those sinful fingers lower. Grabbing onto Loki's wrist he guided the god's hand to where he needed it. He almost came the instant Loki's hand closed around his cock and the god hummed right over his sensitive skin making the fine hair on the nape of his neck stand up, the sound penetrating his body and setting aflame the lust pooling in the pit of his stomach.

'Fuck,' Tony stuttered squirming in the god's languid grip to find more friction.

'Mmm yes, I intend to,' the trickster purred licking the shell of the billionaire's ear then kissing his way back to his neck.

But contrary to those words his strokes were slow and light as he unhurriedly worked Tony into full hardness. He continued in the same infuriating pace even when the engineer's hips started to rut faster against his hand in need of a release. The god then just snaked his other arm under his lover's body to stop him from moving.

'Babe,' Tony whined breathless.

'Not yet love.'

They were now flush against each other and the inventor could feel Loki's hard cock pressing against his ass. So in retaliation Tony wriggled his butt sinuously pressing on Loki's erection and eliciting a guttural moan from the god.

'Let me go,' Tony moved more urgently against the trickster and they both shuddered from the stimulation. 'Come on.'

Loki reluctantly let him lose confused to why Tony wanted to move away, but the inventor had other plans. He turned and pushed Loki so he landed on his back amidst all the pillows, his gorgeous mouth agape panting with want, raven-black hair spilling around his head like a dark halo. Tony then straddled his slim hips and took both their cocks in hand. They gasped in unison when the human set an almost punishing pace to bring them to completion. He watched, very pleased with himself, Loki writhing under him and bucking his hips up, hands twisted in the sheets moaning and whimpering. He was so beautiful like that, almost ethereal with cheeks flushed pink and a thin film of sweat covering his whole body, eyes glazed and lust filled. And Tony found that he had a dilemma, he wanted to watch his lover be undone by him, but he also wanted to kiss him breathless. Yet when Loki bit his lip as if knowing exactly what went through the inventor's mind Tony just couldn't resist any longer and bent down to devour the god's mouth. They kissed until they both ran out of air and only then reluctantly parted to gasp for so much needed oxygen.

'Anthony... Anthony...' Loki repeated breathlessly like a mantra, 'please I need... make me come.'

One look at the god's beautiful face combined with those words sent the inventor over the edge as he shouted out Loki's name, staining the trickster's abdomen with strings of his seed. The god followed right after with a cry of his own and Tony's pace slowed working them through the

orgasm.

Finally wrung out the engineer plopped down next to the god and swung a hand over his chest.

'I think we need to set a rule,' Tony mumbled into the pillow, 'this is the only acceptable way of waking me up from now on. Seriously, I won't respond to anything else!'

'I think we can work up a compromise,' Loki smiled slowly trailing a finger over his come-stained belly.

'Okay, but we have to seal it with a kiss. Come here!'

The god chuckled and rolled over to hover above Tony just for a moment before his lips touched the inventor's, slowly at first, his eyes open looking into the hazel-brown before licking at the seam asking permission to explore more. Tony moaned as his fingers buried in the dark, soft locks tickling his face and he scooped them into a bun on Loki's nape at the same time opening his lips for the god. The kiss was more tender than the previous one and they savored it as long as they could, tongues dancing together, curious and exploring. When they parted and Loki moved away Tony made a face at the mess the drying come left over both their bodies.

'We need a shower, then breakfast. After that let's go to the beach!' The inventor decided stretching. 'Jarvis what time is it?'

*'Good morning sirs. It's 10:37 AM, and if I may sir, your luggage has been delivered and deposited near the main entrance.'*

'Oh good. Did you make a sweep today yet?' Tony asked trailing after Loki to the bathroom and shamelessly ogling his perfect ass.

*'Yes sir, the premises is clear. No unknown devices were detected,'* the AI informed displaying a weather forecast and latest stock news over the bathroom's big mirror. The billionaire took a glance at the green arrow next to his name and swiped the news off the surface.

'Great, keep up the good work and remember to repeat the checkups at random hours. I don't want any more surprises.'

*'Yes sir.'*

~

True to his word after the worst of the heat passed Tony dragged Loki to his private beach. He regretted deeply that the god couldn't see the perfect white sand and the azure lagoon spanning before them. It was late afternoon and the sun wasn't so unforgiving anymore, but he still made sure that the god's porcelain skin was properly protected by a generous amount of sunscreen (okay it was really hot rubbing it all over Loki's body). This day was all he needed right now, some quiet, sexy time with his gorgeous lover, without any interruptions from the other Avengers or S.H.I.E.L.D., no super villains to defeat or give statements/interviews/press conferences of any kind. A blissful vacation. Although Tony knew he would get bored of doing almost nothing all day pretty quickly, but for now he enjoyed it and the view of Loki's strong muscles working in the water as he swam was a reward in itself; the engineer had to make a mental note to show the god the pool at the Avengers Tower.

Oh and the sex on the beach under the starry sky? Exquisite. 20 out of 10.

It took them quite some time to cool down after and head home, but finally, long after midnight the

pair walked hand in hand through the dimly lit house, quietly enjoying their closeness and promptly collapsed onto their king-size bed tired, but truly, immensely happy.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 28

The hot desert wind whooshed around them carrying with itself Loki's delighted laugh. They just passed Nevada's border, driving almost 70 mph with the hood down in one of Tony's newest sport cars.

'Oh this feels exquisite!' The god beamed at Tony, his hands above head flailing with the wind, gliding through it like swallows.

They were on the way to meet Doom, not literally, the inventor snorted upon realizing the word play, but Stark managed to schedule a meeting with the doctor in Las Vegas. Apparently the mage attended a conference there and Tony persuaded him that it would be in his best interest to take a break for a chat. He remained appropriately ominous not wanting to reveal too much through the phone. The less people knew about their plans, the better.

Now, that they were on their way, the engineer wasn't so sure about this whole grand scheme they came up with. It wasn't that he didn't want for Loki to get better, on the contrary, but he was worried. What if that Doom fellow was a hoax and he would hurt Loki, intentionally or not? Tony wouldn't be able to live with the knowledge that it was indirectly by his hand that the god would have to suffer again... or worse.

The trickster on the other hand was delighted to have a plan at all. One by one all the plans he had devised to escape the sigils fell to pieces and it stung that he was unable to break Odin's curses. Struggle as he did the sigils still marred his pale flesh and they weren't going anywhere any time soon, unless Doom would turn out to be some kind of genius. But Tony wasn't so sure; his name itself sounded mad enough, no one sane would call himself Victor von Doom, or Doctor Doom for short. And not to mention his recent attack the Avengers had to stop; if not for Loki it might have taken them much longer to counter the mad doctor's bots.

Of one thing the inventor was certain though: they couldn't underestimate him only because he was new in the game. A lot of wanna-be villains poked their heads through the snow like snowdrops in spring after Loki's failed invasion, with the ambition to be the new world's conqueror. For now they were all easy enough for the Avengers to manage, but Tony dreaded the moment when one of them would prove to be a real challenge and they wouldn't be enough anymore.

The billionaire's thoughts were interrupted by a familiar guitar solo and he smiled briefly when AC/DC's *Highway to Hell* started playing in the radio. He hummed to the familiar tunes, from time to time glancing at Loki and his hands still dancing in the air, a broad smile plastered to his lips. The god really enjoyed the ride, the wind tangling his long hair and caressing his face and the speed with which they moved with. It reminded him of flying and freedom, being able to go wherever he wished without any restrictions - a feeling he hadn't felt in a long time.

They both started to shout the chorus, but when the last words reverberated in the air and another song started playing Tony's good mood dimmed a little. He hoped that the lyrics were not a prophecy for what awaited them in the near future.

*I'm on the highway to hell*

*And I'm going down, all the way down*

*On the highway to hell.*

~

They arrived at the Strip late in the afternoon. The streets were bursting with tourists and Tony tried to maneuver his car cautiously enough to not hit anyone, the press and paparazzi would be all over them in an instant and they were supposed to keep a low profile. Well it will probably be impossible to stay out of social media, with Tony's mug being so recognizable, but for once he didn't want to make a fuss out of his presence here.

Soon they stopped in front of the Bellagio and a smiling valet instantly sprang to their aid. Tony waited for Loki to get out of the car and motioned for the boy to move closer.

'No keys, he'll know where to go, just let him.'

The boy's pupils widened comically as he eyed the new Jarvis equipped Jaguar F-type convertible and Tony chuckled amused.

'Have fun.'

He then took Loki's hand and they went inside.

'You okay?' Stark asked the god meandering between other guests who were loitering in the grand lobby. The trickster nodded curtly.

'Let's get settled then, eat something and rest a bit. Then we'll find our doctor.'

The check in was a short affair and soon they were left alone in the Chairman Suite. Tony looked around and smiled appreciatively.

'I always liked it here.'

Soon after they finished unpacking their few possessions the dinner has been sent and they ate it in silence. The engineer noticed that Loki was nervous, which was understandable considering what they were planning to do so he left his almost untouched plate and sat next to the god on the couch. His right hand snaked around the deity's waist and he scooped Loki closer to his chest.

'Talk to me,' Tony touched the god's temple with his lips.

'I... worry.'

*No shit Sherlock*, the inventor wanted to say but he bit his tongue, it would add to nothing and only make Loki withdraw more. Instead he kissed the god's brow.



'It's alright, we can do it.'

'That I don't doubt, but what if this Doom also won't know what to do? The All-Father's magic is very powerful and not to be taken lightly. I underestimated his will to keep me bound, I thought in my arrogance that it would be a child's play to undo those bindings, an exercise. Instead after so many months I'm still nowhere close to being rid of them. Yes, I managed to bend them just slightly, but that's all I achieved,' the god took a deep breath. 'What if there isn't a way? I cannot be a burden to you for the rest of your life.'

'Wait, what? You are worried about *THAT*? Damn it Loki you are in no way a burden to me! On the contrary, you are a great asset. You helped me and the Avengers on a number of missions for Christ's sake! Where from did you get the idea that you're a burden?'

The god just shrugged, his head down, there was no trace of the good mood from before.

'I constantly need your presence to function, isn't that just chaining you down to me? And what will happen when you inevitably get fed up with me and decide you have enough of babysitting a disabled god.'

'God I want to smack you over the head so much right now, but I would probably break my wrist doing that so let me tell you instead that I fucking love having you around, disabled or not, it doesn't make any difference. I don't like you for being able to throw daggers with deadly accuracy, or for your magic, however cool and frustrating it might be. I like you for your beautiful brain, for your wit, for your sense of humor and for being able to keep up with me. Not many can achieve that.'

Loki sighed when Tony's thumb caressed his cheek and he leaned into the inventor's hand taking comfort in its warmth. He was so anxious now that they arrived to this loud city with so many foreign noises and throngs of people. There were questions swarming in his head, questions he had no answers to, so many 'what ifs'. He was so tired of constant failures, he wished for the plan to just go as it should. Just this once.

'Okay I've decided!' Tony exclaimed cheerfully. 'We're in Vegas baby, we're going to get wasted tonight! But after we get this shit done. The doctor agreed to meet us in his room at 8 and it's almost time. Come on.'

~

He should have expected that, he really should, but when a bot answered Tony's insistent, slightly nervous knocking on the hotel door, the inventor couldn't suppress a flinch as his body instinctively coiled anticipating an attack. But when seconds passed and nothing happened Stark relaxed a little and addressed the construct.

'We had an appointment. Is the doctor around?'

Without a word or any kind of affirmation the Doombot (as Tony dubbed it) moved aside and disappeared in the adjoined room not even looking back to see if the guests followed in its steps.

'They're not very bright,' the engineer remarked to Loki quietly as they passed from the hall into the dining room.

'They are still learning,' a voice boomed from the direction of the floor-to-ceiling windows. The room was dark, illuminated only by the faraway lights of the streets below. Tony could barely make out a silhouette sitting in one of the armchairs and congratulated himself on being a moron

and not bringing any guns with them. Not that they would help much...

'Doctor Doom I presume?' He asked feigning confidence that eluded him at the moment. If there are more of those cyborgs around they might be in trouble.

'Yes, you wished to speak with me. Speak then Mister Stark and leave me be.'

'You know me? Well of course you do, who doesn't,' Tony started to babble, but Loki's hand squeezing lightly around his wrist stopped the oncoming tirade.

'You possess Seiðr... magic yes? I can sense it. Are you a skilled user?' The god stepped forward, but his hand remained linked with Tony's.

'I am and I can feel that you are too, but your force is suppressed. It feels revolting - this binding of yours,' Doom nodded and the inventor could swear that he spotted a glint of metal on his face, but in the dark room he barely could see his own nose.

'Is the darkness necessary, or is that just to intimidate us? It kinda doesn't work, he's blind and I'm just irritated.'

The doctor chuckled and it made Tony's hair stand up, there was something not right with their host.

'It is for my benefit. After a recent... accident I am still light sensitive,' he waved a hand and a dim light bloomed in the peripherals of Tony's vision. The engineer's eyes widened as he noticed the armor encasing Doom. Was he anticipating a fight?

'Don't be alarmed Mister Stark I do not wish you harm just yet.'

'What does that supposed to mean?' Tony balked, suddenly feeling very exposed. Of course Jarvis was on stand-by, but a well-placed bullet was faster than even his AI.

'You intrigued me when we spoke on the phone, so I would like to hear first about your problem and then I will decide if it is worth my time. Take a seat.' The doctor shifted in his chair and the billionaire absently noted how uncomfortable it must be for him to sit in that armor.

'That's reassuring,' Tony muttered.

'You said you can feel the shackles binding me,' Loki interjected before his lover could say anything else to antagonize the doctor. 'I cannot be rid of them on my own, I need someone adept in the Seiðr craft who could do that for me. Breaking the spell requires a mind different than my own or that of who cast it.'

'A challenge! I would see those bindings then.'

'Just like that?' Tony asked suspicious. Things were never that easy. 'No demands?'

'I need to examine them first before I am to decide the cost.'

Loki stood up at the same time Doom did and he slowly started unbuttoning his shirt. This mortal was his last hope and the deity was reluctant to admit how desperate he was for this to work.

Cold metal fingers touched his skin and started tracing patterns over it making Loki shiver involuntarily, grossed out by the unfamiliar feeling. It felt nothing like Tony's gauntleted hands - careful and delicate, Doom's grip was hard and wrong, the edges of his armor sharp. The god

wanted to move away and run, but instead he stood his ground and endured, gritting his teeth to not lash out and ruin his last chance.

'Intriguing...' Doom murmured lifting the trickster's arm higher to examine the marks from all sides. 'How do they distribute your force? Is it instantaneously removed or can you accumulate a certain amount?'

'I can and with practice I did manage to bend them to let me gather more than at the beginning. But the sigils feed on my Seiðr and clot my veins making spell casting a painful ordeal.' Loki explained glad when Doom finally let go of him.

'Indeed? You are certain they thrive on it?'

'Yes,' the god shuddered again, the feeling of his Seiðr being devoured by the spell haunted him even in his sleep.

'You have your answer then,' Doom reclaimed his armchair and regarded Loki curiously. 'But are you desperate enough to do it.'

The realization hit him and Loki almost collapsed on the couch next to Tony who looked sharply to his host.

'What do you mean?'

'What would happen Mister Stark if you suddenly stopped eating?' The doctor's armored face turned towards the inventor.

'What? What does it have to do with anything?'

'Humor me.'

'I would be hungry,' the billionaire hissed out irritated.

'And then?' Doom prompted waving a hand for him to go on.

'I would starve... and die...' It dawned on Tony then where the doctor was getting at. 'So you think that if we remove all magic from Loki's body the sigils will what? Evaporate or something?'

'Or something, yes. Without his magic the spell will become invalid and break.' Doom nodded thoughtful.

'So where's the catch?' Tony looked at Loki who was sitting stunned next to him, the look on his face a mystery to the billionaire.

'I might die,' the god whispered and then burst out laughing. 'Of course Odin never makes anything easy for me. Live subjugated or die trying to free yourself. What a choice!'

'Then it's out of the question,' Stark exclaimed. He wouldn't leave his lover's life in the hands of this weirdo.

'No! I will do it. It's my only chance to be free again.'

'It's too risky! What guarantee do we have that it will even work?! Damn it Loki it's not worth it!' Stark jumped to his feet and started pacing.

'It is to me,' the god said calmly, his mind made. 'And I will do it on my own if I have to.'

'The hell you will,' the inventor turned in half-step growling, his eyes intent on the trickster. His lover's face was collected, no trace of fear whatsoever. Looking at it Tony understood that Loki was dead serious and determined to try, damn the consequences; there was no turning back. 'Fine, but I want to be there when it's done.'

The engineer flopped down next to Loki on the couch defeated, his insides tied in knots from the worry. His hand unconsciously found one of Loki's and their fingers intertwined; Tony wasn't sure if it was to comfort his god or him.

'You've made up your mind?' Doom asked bored by their little show of affection, he came here to do business.

'Yes,' the trickster nodded, 'what needs to be done?'

'And how much do we have to pay for it?' Tony interjected, he hoped it was in his might to pay that price.

'I have to prepare, it may take me a few days, so I will contact you when I'm ready. As for the payment... I want your energy.'

'What?' Tony asked perplexed, his hand instinctively covering the arc reactor.

'The force wrought from a dying mage it very potent Mister Stark, much more so than the one you carry within your chest,' Doom chuckled darkly, the sound ominously reverberating through his iron mask.

'Wait, wait! You said he might die, not that he will die. There's a significant difference there!'

'In order to give up all my Seiðr, this body will have to be rid of all its defenses and you cannot do that consciously. It will have to die briefly and the tricky part is to reanimate it in time,' the god clarified. 'I wish to conduct a test before we start plotting doctor, so that I'm certain you are powerful enough to do it.'

'It can be arranged.'

'Good.'

And with that the negotiations were over. With one last nod Tony and Loki left the doctor's apartment and returned to their own. A heavy silence followed in their wake. The billionaire wasn't sure what to think about all of this. It was a mess, it wasn't even a plan, just a suicide mission. If they were to fail he would have to watch Loki die and Tony wasn't sure if he would recover from that, in all probability he would end up drinking himself into oblivion for the last time.

As he milled in the bathroom a series of visions depicting Loki's lifeless body invaded his mind and a sudden ache in the pit of his belly forced Stark to bend over the sink and hurl out the contents of his stomach. The stench of vomit induced another attack of nausea, but the oncoming panic attack squeezed his throat shut and Tony slid to the ground, his body shaking with uncontrollable tremors.

Loki must have heard something because a moment later he burst in through the bathroom door like a hurricane and landed on his knees next to his lover.

'Anthony,' he breathed out panicked not knowing what was the cause of Tony's sudden illness. Lithe fingers burrowed in the mortal's hair and his head was guided up to look at the god. His beautiful, beautiful god. Stark's throat constricted and he swallowed thickly forcing the bile down.

Loki's milky, unseeing eyes were full of worry when he asked:

'What ails you?'

But instead of answering Tony reached out and gently caressed the god's face sliding his fingers from his temple to chin and over the scarred tissue and for the first time Loki didn't flinch away, too worried about his lover to care.

'Don't do this,' Stark finally managed to croak out and his voice sounded wrecked. 'There is no need to go to such lengths Loki. We can ask Strange to help you now that we know what needs to be done or wait for him to come up with another solution. You don't have to...' a sob tore itself unbidden from his chest when another image of Loki's mangled body manifested in his pounding head.

'No, love. Strange would not perform such a vile ritual and I cannot wait Norns know how long for him to decipher Odin's curse. I do not have the time.'

'You have all the time in the world!' Tony shouted moving his head away from the god's hands. 'For fuck's sake Loki you're immortal!'

'But you are not! I can feel your body dying every day we lie together in bed and I will not waste the precious time we have left being the empty shell I am now!'

'But if you will die for good, god damn it, how am I to handle that?!' Tony shot up ready to bolt from the god, but his head swam and Loki had to catch him before he could hit the ground again. He feebly struggled to get free, but the trickster held him in a firm grip.

'I will not, I swear to you I will not leave you alone. Even if I have to drag myself on hands and knees from Helheimr I will come back to you.'

Loki pressed his lips to Tony's temple and closed his eyes, he could feel the mortal's body tremble against him and he regretted causing him such pain, but there was no other way to do it, no other possibility open to them. It was his only chance and he was determined to take it.

Loki picked his lover up and carefully made his way towards the bedroom. Tony was dead weight in his arms, wrung out by the events of the day, in fact they both were, the god mused setting his lover on the comfortable mattress and slipping behind him. But soon it would all be over and then Loki would be free to set in motion his own plans regarding Tony. Yes, it was about damn time.

~ ~ ~



## Chapter 29

The world kept spinning as Tony laughed surrounded by faerie of colors and sounds. Nearby Loki was bending over a desk, Tony couldn't remember why, but he liked the view. Someone was talking at them, but the inventor's wavering focus stayed on his lover's perfect ass clad in dark, skinny jeans that Tony really wanted to take off. To his dismay though Loki eventually straightened his back putting an end to the playboy's shameless ogling. The trickster smirked at him equally drunk then pulled at the front of Stark's shirt and before the inventor could even blink they were kissing fiercely entwined in a tight embrace, mindless of their surroundings.

After that came loud vibrating music and masses of scarcely dressed bodies writhing and grinding against each other in a mad and hot caricature of dance. Tony discovered that Loki was especially good at grinding and when, at some point during the night, the god's shirt disappeared somewhere without trace, their 'dance' became even more dirty; hot mouths tracing love marks, kissing the old ones and creating fresh, tongues dancing over heated, moist skin to the beat of the music, running after the fleeting lights of colorful lasers grazing over them, alighting their eyes with fire.

Tony couldn't tell how much time they had spent like that - suspended between reality and a drunken trance, only them in a mass of strangers, making love with too light touches and too hard bite marks, lost in lust and heat and need, trying to forget just for the night about what awaited them outside the double black doors guarded by two very muscular bouncers.

But eventually even that had to end and after three days of partying hard in all the best clubs Vegas had to offer the dreaded phone call finally came.

'Doom said he's ready,' Tony frowned at the dark display of his StarkPhone, the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach that he tried to burry under all that booze and hot sex came back with double force.

'He wants us to come tonight for the test thing you asked for.'

Loki hummed in acknowledgement still sprawled naked on the bed, it was just past 10 a.m. and they were yet to have breakfast. Stark seated himself at the edge of the mattress and ran a hand over the god's back up from his hip to shoulder blade, feeling the soft, cool skin he came to know so well. He bent and planted a light kiss over a fading hickey adorning Loki's throat. The trickster purred happily stretching his neck to give Stark easier access to continue his ministrations. Tony happily obliged, but the worry still nagged at him and he just couldn't keep quiet about it.

'Babe... is there really no other way? Can't we just wait? I'm not going anywhere soon, we still have years to...'

'Years!' The god huffed exasperated.

'It's better than *hours* that we have now in case you don't...' He just couldn't say it. Tony never felt that vulnerable in his life, so helpless. There was always some reckless plan at the back of his mind, actions he could take, not this inability to do anything, to only be an observer, his hands and mind useless faced with a problem he couldn't truly comprehend, let alone solve. What if things go wrong? What if Doom betrays them or just fucks up? How is Tony supposed to fix this if he doesn't even understand the problem?!

'We talked about it,' Loki whispered turning towards the inventor.

'Yeah I know, I just... I can't... What am I supposed to do if things go south? There is no reset button here, we can't start over, you will die and then what?!' Something akin to a sob wrenched the inventor's body and he clasped a hand to his lips to prevent it from escaping, but Loki noticed anyway. With his name spoken softly he hugged the billionaire's shaking form and held him against his naked chest stroking the still damp strands of hair, absently noting that they smelled of vanilla and honey.

'I will not die.'

'There is no guarantee...'

**'I will not die.'**

Tony surprisingly believed the god's words and just hugged him closer. There was nothing more to be said on that matter so they just stayed like that until their late breakfast came.

~

The coordinates the mad doctor sent Tony brought them to an abandoned and shady warehouse that stood alone amongst the scorched plains and dead shrubbery of Mojave Desert. There was no other structure in sight and the last gas station they passed was hours away - if something went wrong Tony would be on his own.

The inventor tried very hard not to freak out and just grab Loki, put his stupid ass back in the car and run away - the trickster would never forgive him for that he was sure.

They crossed the short distance to the open and dimly lit door and Tony fleetingly observed that the night sky here in the middle of nowhere looked breath taking - dotted with myriads upon myriads of stars. Since his early high school days he never took the time to really look up into the sky, always focused on what was in front of him and after the invasion... glancing up into the darkness only brought him fear, but maybe when all this shit will finally be over he could take Loki somewhere remote where they could enjoy the view in peace...

The inside of the warehouse looked no better than the outside. Littered with broken crates and rotting barrels it felt almost like a set of a horror movie, the one thing that was missing were the bloody hooks swinging from the ceiling... they even had their mad doctor. Doom stood in the center of a cleared up space, a lone light bulb swinging above his hooded head and casting sinister shadows all over his body. The doctor's armor looked black and menacing, its surface glinting dully like drying tar.

As they approached Tony scanned their surroundings and noticed a metal table with various items on top standing to the side, at the edge of the light circle. His grip on the suitcased armor tightened as the foreboding feeling in his stomach grew stronger.

'A+ for the atmosphere, should have ditched the light bulb and go with candles,' Tony smiled the

best press smile he could manage, but his heart kept hammering against the arc reactor as crazy.

*This is it.*

If someone told him a year ago that he would find himself in a situation like this: asking a wannabe villain for help, with Loki of all people, he would call them mad and pay for their treatment out of pity. Yet here they were, hand in hand, both probably praying to some higher force that Tony didn't even believe in for this mad plan to work.

'Don't step on the diagram!' Doom boomed and only then Tony noticed the complicated design drawn on the cold concrete with something that disturbingly like blood, the engineer only hoped it wasn't human's. He steered Loki away from the drawing and towards the armored villain. The god's body started trembling slightly and Stark's brow furrowed with worry.

'What's wrong?'

'I can feel it, the spell drawn onto this ground. It is even more revolting than Odin's bindings. It makes me sick.' The trickster took a deep breath and steeled himself for what was to come. Tony admired his stupid courage and strong will and at the same time cursed it. He wished fervently they didn't have to do this.

'I am ready,' Loki announced with his head held high and back straight. He looked like a king addressing his subjects: proud and fearless, but they both knew it to be a facade; he was as terrified as Tony, probably even more so.

'What about the test?' The inventor asked confused. Loki was supposed to check if Doom would be able to get the job done.

'We will conduct it now,' the doctor beckoned Loki closer and the engineer was left behind accompanied by one of the Doombots that materialized from the shadows just as they entered the premises.

When the god approached him Doom procured a short blade from within the folds of his tunic and turned it in his fingers so the dull yellow light of the bulb could reflect from its sharp planes.

'You know, his skin is more dense than ours,' the billionaire observed warily watching the wicked knife move so close to his god. 'I don't think this will work.'

'It is made from adamantium Mister Stark, it will serve its purpose well.'

'What are you planning anyway?' Tony asked stretching his neck to better see.

'Just a cut to demonstrate that I am capable of healing.' He then slit the blade over the god's forearm and dark blood instantly started flowing from the wound. Loki didn't even flinch, he just waited patiently, breathing just slightly deeper, for the doctor to continue. Finally, to Tony's relief, he covered the laceration with his armored palm and a faint green glow bloomed between their bodies.

'Satisfied?' The mad villain asked.

'Yes, it is sufficient.'

'Good!'

In one, swift move Doom embodied the blade in Loki's chest and Tony watched in horror as it sunk

to the hilt, slicing the tissue as if it was paper. A surprised gasp left the god's lips as the pain registered and he stumbled back, his white, unseeing eyes huge with shock.

'No!' Stark screamed and was ready to leap forward and rip Doom's head off, but was stopped by a crushing force of the Doombot's robotic limbs. He struggled almost dislocating a shoulder and watched helplessly as Loki's limp body crumbled to the ground.

'You motherfucker, why?! Jarvis deploy!'

'Calm yourself Mister Stark.'

'Fuck you!' The mechanic growled twisting in the android's death grip.

Loki wheezed weakly trying to reach the wound with shaking hands, but he was bleeding out rapidly and had almost no strength left to move. The blow must have been delivered expertly to pierce one of the ventricles, because a large amount of blood quickly started pooling underneath his body.

Gut twisting with the burning feeling of failure, Tony watched through unshed tears the god's body slowly turning blue. First the trembling fingers clutching weakly at the bloodied hoodie, then neck, jaw and cheeks, all marked with thin, razed lines.

It only took seconds for the suit to start assembling itself around the inventor - gauntlets first so he could blast the fucking Doombot away, but for Tony it felt like an eternity. Before he was fully armored, Loki's body stopped moving and he lay motionlessly, wide, scared eyes turned skyward.

Iron man finally being rid of the bot jetted towards its creator, but an invisible force field stopped him before he could reach Doom.

'Jarvis?' Stark snarled pounding at the barrier before him. It felt solid like a brick wall and after a few powerful blasts he confirmed that it was also impenetrable. Strings of data and diagrams started popping out in front of his eyes and Tony looked around in search of something that could help.

In the meantime Doom squatted next to the god and pressed his palm against Loki's bloody chest. A strong, blue light lit up the joints of his armor as he started absorbing Loki's *Seiðr*.

The engineer's eyes fell upon the fake diagram drawn on the floor and he cursed. They've been played and stepped right into the trap like flies caught in a cobweb.

Rage buzzed in Tony's veins and he didn't even blink discharging a powerful repulsor blast to blow up another Doombot into oblivion.

'DOOM!' he roared, voice slightly distorted by the speakers, but the doctor didn't pay him any heed, he just absorbed more and more of Loki's life.

Left without other options Iron man stumbled a few steps back and ordered his AI to charge the unibeam. Loki was already dead, but he wouldn't let Doom steal all of his magic.

Jarvis was counting down to the blast, when the doctor suddenly looked up, his eyes alight with an eerie blue glow and with a mere twist of his wrist blew Tony away throwing him a few feet into the air.

'Doom always keeps up his promises,' the doctor bellowed in a strange voice and before Stark could scramble back up he looked down to Loki's still form and once again placed a hand on his

chest. This time through the glow emanating from his palm was green as he send in a pulse of energy into the trickster's body. The god gasped and arched of the ground, mouth open wide in a silent scream. Tony rose to his knees and watched in disbelief as his god curled into a tight ball on the cold concrete and started coughing.

'Oh fuck, oh fuck! Jarvis open!'

*'Sir I don't think...'*

'Open!'

Just as Tony's visor went up and the plates started unfolding Doom took one step away from the curled up body and vanished without a trace, leaving them alone in the ruined warehouse.

Tripping like mad the inventor skidded into a stop and fell to his knees embracing his heaving lover. Shaken to the core of his arc reactor Tony started laughing and kissing Loki all over his blue face and hands.

He was alive, they were both alive!

~

The drive back to the hotel went relatively smooth. Loki slept for the whole trip, curled up in the passenger seat, facing away from Tony. The inventor occasionally took a glance his was to make sure the god was still breathing; after what Doom did to him Stark wanted to be sure this wasn't another trick.

Not to mention that the blue skin fascinated him. Tony wanted to map it with his tongue, trace the raised lines swirling over the trickster's cheekbones and disappearing under the hoodie. Loki was always secretive about his jotun form, ashamed and reluctant to be seen while transformed. But Tony wasn't appalled like the god thought he would be, just the opposite - if he could he wouldn't let Loki out of his grasp before he could test the sensitivity of every inch of the jotun's body. Yet he didn't want to push seeing how the god loathed it.

Tony stopped at an intersection waiting for the lights to change when to his right a jeep full of loud music and laughing teenagers screeched into a stop. They started pointing at Loki and sniggering, one even took out a phone and started recording. The billionaire flashed them a wide smile full of teeth and nodded to the sleeping god.

'Wild party huh? That's what you get for drinking without limit.'

Just as he turned back the lights changed color and he pressed the pedal to the floor.

'Jarvis be a dear and get rid of that footage for me as soon as it hits the net then delete the original file.'

*'I will see to that sir,'* the AI responded right away.

'And when we get to the hotel take care of surveillance. I don't want anyone seeing us.'

*'Of course sir. I recommend the cargo lift, you can access it from the underground garage.'*

'Sounds good enough, just make sure no one is using it.' Tony shifted gears and the engine growled under the hood as they gained speed.



Thanks to Jarvis the ride up to their suite was quick and uneventful. Tony carefully cradled Loki against his chest as he carried the god into the bedroom. The deity's temperature was distinctly lower in this form, but it didn't stop the inventor from curling behind him in the bed. It was good after midnight and they both could use some sleep. The rest could wait until morning. With that thought in mind the billionaire snuggled closer to his lover, inhaled his new, fresh smell and planted a light kiss on an exposed shoulder. The skin felt surprisingly smooth under his lips, but more firm and thick than that of the Aesir version. Closing his eyes Tony smiled to himself and hoped to wake up to his lover's blue form still intact. He had so many ideas regarding it.

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## Chapter 30

Tina Turner was pouring her heart out through the radio waves slowly driving Tony insane. There was some sort of 80s rock ballads marathon going on that the inventor didn't particularly mind at first (he needed some softer tunes to not disturb the alien prince sleeping in the passenger seat), but after almost two hours of listening to sappy love songs he was considering causing a car crash just to stop the heartache.

It was stupid how some of the lyrics described almost perfectly his own thoughts about a certain god, albeit in more flowery and sickeningly sweet fashion.

Tony glanced at the deity in question about a millionth time that night, but Loki's almost catatonic state hasn't change. The trickster didn't move a muscle ever since he was placed by Tony in the car; he breathed and his abused heart beat steadily under the blue skin, but other than that he was unresponsive.

Stark's fingers involuntarily squeezed the steering wheel so hard his knuckles turned white. It was a mistake to even remotely trust Doom, and they both - idiots that they are - jumped head first into his outstretched steel hands almost begging to be exploited.

And now next to Tony laid the result of their stupidity: Loki unconscious and magicless, maybe injured! And the only thing Tony could do was to haul the god's blue ass into the car, drive him home and pray for a miracle.

First notes of Aerosmith's *Crazy* sounded through the speakers and Stark snorted, grimly amused: oh yes they were both crazy alright.

~

Stark drove the distance from Las Vegas to Malibu in record time. The sun just started to peeking over the hills when he parked the car in front of his house.

Exhausted mentally and physically Tony leaned his forehead against the steering wheel and sighed deeply. The inventor's insides were tied into knots and the anxiety pressed the arc reactor deeper into his sternum almost making him unable to breathe. Tony closed his eyes for a moment and counted to ten twice and then a third time for good measure, but the dreadful feeling just wouldn't leave him.

What if they made things worse? If trying to remove the sigils was a mistake and Loki won't wake up? What if it was some kind of a test and the trickster failed it, because he was too impatient to undergo his punishment? *What if? What if? What if?*

A shudder ran over Tony's spine and the billionaire growled, pissed off at himself for his impotency to help the god. He bit the inside of his cheek in an attempt to suppress the frustrated scream that boiled in his throat demanding to be let out.

Rays of the morning sun slowly moved over the mansion's porch and the side of the car illuminating Loki's profile just as Stark opened his eyes to peer at his lover. He looked so peaceful and beautiful. Even the scarring appeared less gruesome in the soft light. Straightening his back the inventor shifted in his seat and reached out to caress the god's cheek. He barely managed to glide his fingers over Loki's cheekbone when the god's eyes suddenly flashed open and he gasped startling Stark in the process.

'Fucking shit!' Tony cursed jumping in the seat.

The trickster hissed as if burned and slung an arm over his face; a moment later he started laughing.

'Damn! You scared the shit out of me! How are you feeling?' Tony asked massaging his freshly bruised knee; Loki was beginning to heave hysterically.

When the cackling continued for a few more seconds without the god even acknowledging his presence Stark's brow furrowed with worry.

'Babe you're scaring me, what's going on?'

'It hurts!' The god flashed his manic smile at Tony and the first thought that went through the inventor's mind was that the ritual failed and Loki had gone mad.

'What hurts? Loki talk to me! *What hurts?*' There was a hint of panic in Stark's voice. He quickly jumped out of the car and went around it almost yanking the doors on the passenger's side out. He squatted next to Loki and looked him over in the bright light of the morning.

The trickster's alien coloring wouldn't let Tony even estimate if the god was having a fever or something like that; yet the light blue parole seemed to be healthy, without any splotches of darker hues. Loki didn't appear to be sweating either - on the other hand Tony wasn't sure if the jotun was capable of perspiration in this form.

The engineer reached out and captured the god's face in his hands, thumbs caressing prominent cheekbones. Loki wouldn't open his eyes though, even when Tony guided his face down to take a better look at it.

'My eyes hurt,' Loki whispered leaning into the touch; he was still smiling.

'Is that a good thing? I don't think it's a good thing!'

'They are light sensitive Anthony, they are healing!'

It took good thirty seconds for Stark's brain to process the information, but when it finally clicked he also burst out laughing; now they were both cackling like madmen. Relieved beyond belief Tony reached up and pressed his lips to Loki's kissing him passionately. He couldn't believe it. They did it! They finally did it!

'Okay Snowflake, let's get you to the workshop. I won't rest until Jarvis performs all kinds of scans

on you.'

Tony stood up and helped Loki get out of the car; one of the god's hands once again covered his eyes protecting them from the waking sun.

Soon enough they ended up in the workshop - Loki sitting on a stool and Tony running around him like a moth over a flame, sticking electrodes and markers for Jarvis all over the jotun's skin.

'Why are you still blue?' Stark asked suddenly smoothing a hand over the god's shoulder and back marveling at the unusual hue. Loki looked so different yet at the same time so familiar and Tony craved to explore this change, trace the raised markings decorating his lover's body with his tongue and fingers, kiss every sensitive spot he knew and observe if the god reacted differently to his touch. Tony had so many ideas that his head was spinning.

'I am not sure, it should have turned back to normal by now. Maybe every spell Odin placed upon me has been dispelled. Does it... bother you seeing me like that?' Loki asked quietly, his head low as if he was waiting for a blow.

'Sure it does, I am trying very hard to control myself and not just drag you to the bedroom, undress you and lick every inch of you with my tongue. It's an effort and this coloration isn't helping.'

Loki's head shot up (his eyes were now securely protected by a bandage), lips slightly agape as if he wanted to say something, but couldn't get the words out. So Tony just smiled and bent down to kiss the bewilderment away.

'You are impossible,' the trickster murmured against his lips when they parted for breathe.

'So they say!'

*'Sir, the scan is complete. We don't have any data concerning Mr. Loki's energy flow from before the attack on New York, but comparing the readings you have gathered after and enhancing them I rendered a simulation imitating it and cross referenced against the newest readings. It would appear that the flow was restored mostly to its original state,'* Jarvis chimed in displaying the data on the nearest holoscreen, right next to Tony.

'Mostly?' The engineer asked going through the info. He wished Bruce was here, he would have been a great help in analyzing the data.

'There is a higher concentration of energy amassed in upper parts of Mr. Loki's body.'

'I'm letting *Seiðr* repair any damage it is capable of mending, but I am not entirely sure how much that is yet,' Loki shrugged.

'So there is no guarantee that you will actually see again?' Tony sat on the nearest workbench distraught by the notion, but he was glad nonetheless that Loki was alive and kicking, working eyes or not. He learned his lesson - he didn't care if the god was blind or crippled or whatever as long as he was safe and by his side.

'No, I am positive they will heal, it might just take some time. I'm using every ounce of *Seiðr* at my disposal to return them to normal, but my magic is regenerating sluggishly still.'

'Good, good,' Tony yawned suddenly and his brain short-circuited for a moment from exhaustion.

'You are tired,' Loki stated the obvious standing up. He extended a hand towards the inventor and smiled. 'Let's get you to sleep.'

'I'm not ti...' Stark wanted to protest, but another wide yawn prevented him from finishing.

'Come, be my guide. I would not want to trip over one of your inventions.'

The jotun beamed at Tony when the engineer's fingers intertwined with his as they ascended the stairs to the ground floor together.

~

A distant sound of rain woke Tony from a very pleasant dream which fled his mind as soon as he opened his eyes. The inventor yawned and stretched kicking away the soft covers. Late afternoon sun illuminated the far wall of the bedroom making the floral pattern lit like a swarm of will o' the wisps. Tony scrunched his nose; if the sun was shining where did the rain come from? The answer presented itself a second later when the billionaire turned to face his lover and found the space beside him empty, but still warm to the touch. Stark grinned mischievously, jumped out of bed and buck ass naked sashayed to the bathroom whistling off tune and just as he was about to enter the doors swung open and he collided with a firm, still wet chest of his lover.

'Umf!' Stark grunted precariously balancing with his body trying to stay upright and was rescued by Loki arms snaking around his torso, hands settling at the small of his back.

'Damn!' Tony swore lifting his head up to look at the god. 'And I hoped to join you in the shower.'

'You are too late then *elsker*,' Loki smiled at him, his thumbs drawing small circles on the engineer's back. The trickster then spun them around and lightly pushed Tony into the bathroom. 'You should hurry or else I'll get bored and will have to entertain myself.'

Stark's mouth fell open unable to form coherent words and he hurried towards the shower almost breaking his neck on the wet tiles followed by Loki's chuckle, but before he closed the glass door behind himself he shouted:

'What did you call me?' But only more laughter answered him.

The inventor showered in record time and exited the bathroom only a few minutes later just to be greeted by the most beautiful sight ever: Loki sprawled on top of the covers, fluffy towel riding so high on his thighs that it barely covered anything, damp, black curls spread on the pillow like a dark halo and the most lewd smile Tony had ever seen on his face.

'Wow,' the inventor breathed taking in the gorgeous display of ivory skin. He mourned a little the absence of blue, but Loki was perfect in every form and Tony was certain that given time the god could be persuaded to strip the glamour for him.

'Will you do it for me?' The trickster asked yanking Tony away from his inappropriate thoughts.

'Hm? What?'

'The bandage. Will you take it off?'

The mechanic sat at the edge of the bed, arousal forgotten for a second.

'You sure? Isn't it too early?'

'You slept through the whole day Anthony and I used all of my returning *Seiðr* to speed up the healing process. Also, thanks to having access to my pocket dimensions again I could use some of my healing stones. The work is far from complete, but I think that it is enough for now. And I want



to see you anew with my eyes and not through magic,' Loki admitted quietly.

'Oh... okay, right,' Tony stammered suddenly feeling hot in the face. He moved closer to the god and with slightly shaking fingers started unrolling the bandage. 'Jarvis tint the windows and turn on the lights. 30%. Warm hues.'

*'Yes sir.'*

He also covered his arc reactor with one hand and when the last layer was finally off Stark breathed out a sigh he didn't know he was holding. The god's face looked much better than it used to, the scarring seemed less angry, now smoother and lighter. But the scars weren't important right now, what was under them carried much more value.

'Ready?' The billionaire gently caressed Loki's cheek and watched with bated breath how the god's eyelashes fluttered and lifted slowly revealing the most gorgeous shade of green the inventor had ever seen.

'Oh fuck,' he said with awe starring at the god's face. 'Can you..?'

Loki blinked once, then again. At closer inspection the green wasn't really the brilliant shade he remembered, but the healing wasn't completed yet.

'Yes... I... it is still blurry, but yes, I see shapes and light,' the god blinked a few more times then closed his eyes entirely.

'Don't strain yourself, it's just the first day, I'm sure it will get better,' Tony assured. His heart was pounding fast against the arc reactor and he was grinning like mad; Loki was finally free from Odin's shackles.

'I'm trying to speed up the healing process, but I have never done something like that before and I'm not really sure...'

'Leave it, let it heal on its own. There's no need to rush.' Stark folded the bandage and placed it on the night stand.

'Just a little... ah yes the image is improving.'

'Loki...'

The trickster was positively glowing, his smile so wide when he looked at Tony that the inventor didn't have the heart to scold him for his impatience. Instead he moved closer and swung a leg over Loki's thighs to straddle his lap.

'I think you need a distraction,' Stark murmured, his lips mere inches away from the immortal's. The god's pupils dilated, the left one slightly more than the other as he swallowed audibly.

'I can see you Tony Stark,' Loki whispered, voice shaking. He blinked rapidly a few times and a stray tear rolled down his cheek.

The engineer just smiled and closed the distance between them slowly touching Loki's lips with his own. At first the kiss was sweet and innocent, just a light caress, but soon Loki grew impatient. The god moaned and opened his mouth inviting Tony in, but the inventor had other plans. Instead of delving into the enticing heat he teased by brushing his tongue over Loki's lower lip making the trickster whine in protest. Stark chuckled pecking Loki on his pink, pouting mouth, his eyes never straying away from the other's.

'Lie down,' Stark rested his hands on the mage's shoulders and pushed a little to prompt the god. He had just a nanosecond to recognize the mischievous spark in Loki's eyes before he was skillfully manhandled ending up on his back instead.

'This could work too.'

Without further ado Loki descended on him and claimed his mouth licking at the seam for Tony to grand him entry and the inventor did, foregoing the teasing this time. Their tongues danced around each other caressing and exploring and when at some point Loki started sucking lightly at his, Tony's brain might have experienced a brief black out. After they finally surfaced for breath they were both rock hard.

Somehow this felt entirely different than their previous sex encounters. Tony couldn't really place the cause for the change, but it just felt... more. More intense, more hot, more everything and the butterflies fluttering against his arc reactor didn't help.

He felt lightheaded when Loki's mouth left his and trailed a string of sloppy kisses and hot love marks down his throat and ribcage. And when Loki nosed at the hollow of his hip Tony was positively breathless.

'Loki... oh god, Loki,' Stark panted almost incoherent, burying calloused fingers in the god's long tresses while said god sucked another red mark on the inside of his left thigh. Heat pooled at the pit of his stomach and Tony's leg muscles quivered uncontrollably under the trickster's ministrations. He tried, he really tried gently guiding Loki's head towards his raging hard on, but the god was unmovable like a mountain instead lavishing at his creations with a skillful tongue.

'Loki please...' The inventor peered down at his lover with hazy gaze and was met with the glorious green from his dreams. He was mesmerized by the heated look and couldn't break the eye contact even if he wanted. He watched avidly as Loki at last stopped torturing the tender flesh on the inside of his thighs and positioned himself in front of Tony's straining cock. Stark's breath hitched when the god slowly licked his way from the base to the crown never looking away from the billionaire's face, eyes burning with so many emotions. He rested the tip of Tony's cock on his lower lip and the inventor trembled with anticipation of what was to come. The trickster's tongue teased at the slit licking away beads of precome before he took the head inside his warm mouth and started sucking at it.

Stark shouted hoarsely assaulted by the perfect heat and his hips spasmed burying his cock deeper into Loki. The god's hand circled around the base of his erection and kept him pinned down to the mattress. Stark shot him an apologetic smile, but Loki was too immersed in his ministrations to notice, sucking and hollowing his cheeks around the pulsing flesh of Tony's dick.

It took embarrassingly little time for Tony to fall off the brink and come, shooting thick strands of white deep down Loki's throat. The god took it all swallowing eagerly around Stark while the human arched from the bed moaning, fingers clawing at the sheets and twisting them so hard his knuckles turned white. When he finally plopped down exhausted and panting Loki slowly crawled up Stark's body on all four, his own erection full, bobbing between pale thighs. The god lowered himself, half lying on top of the inventor, cock pressing into Stark's hip and hovered with his face above Tony's.

'You look exquisite like this,' Loki whispered reverently. His eyes shone with warmth and love Tony had never seen before aimed at himself. The butterflies around his arc reactor reawakened and tried to dislodge the reactor's casing with double force. Stark's voice got stuck in his throat and his mouth just hang uselessly unable to produce any sound, so instead he snaked one arm around the god's neck and pulled him in for a long, long kiss. His second hand though slid over the

trickster's chest and abs and closed around Loki's straining erection. The god whined when Tony gave the hard cock an experimental tug, thumbing the slit for a little extra slickness. At the same time he lightly scratched the mage's scalp and Loki dissolved into a purring putty warm against his side.

'You like that?' The billionaire asked twisting his wrist and Loki shuddered choking on a sob. He plastered himself even closer to Tony, hips undulating to the rhythm of the inventor's strokes, mouth gasping as he sought completion. While the trickster was distracted Tony's hand withdrew from his silky hair and reappeared in front of his swollen, moist lips. Without further prompting Loki first swirled his skillful tongue around the two offered digits slicking them thoroughly to then sensually take them into his mouth and suck, all the while watching Tony with hooded eyes.

'Fuck!' The man grunted unable to take his eyes of the trickster. They were staring at each other, both lost in the moment until Loki broke the spell by biting Stark's fingers to remind him that his other hand stopped moving.

'Right... uh, sorry. *Fuck.*' Tony stammered resuming his work. Loki sucked one last time around the intrusion in his mouth then released the fingers now covered in a generous amount of saliva.

'Hurry,' he breathed moving sinfully against the inventor.

Tony considered making the god beg for him, but discarded the idea quickly. His own cock was starting to reawaken and it would be to their mutual benefit if he prepared Loki carefully.

Nodding, the billionaire shifted Loki a bit closer still, angling his body so he would have easy access to both his front and back side. Then his slicked fingers found the cleft of Loki's ass and slid there circling the puckered asshole before one of them dipped inside. The trickster tensed at the intrusion, but soon relaxed when Tony stopped pushing. He was so tight, Stark observed resuming after a heartbeat at Loki's nod, so tight and hot.

While the engineer's left hand was busy opening the god, his other slowed to a languid pace around the god's throbbing cock. But after a few minutes of slowly working him Loki got impatient and started fucking himself on Tony's finger.

'Another,' the god hissed against Stark's ear alternately biting at his earlobe and sucking a mark at the tender spot behind it.

'We need a better lubricant, you're too tight.'

Loki growled with frustration and lifted himself high enough to look over a shoulder at his own ass. The god's hand, that up until now was busy massaging Tony's abs, glowed faintly green for a fraction of a second and when the god touched it to Stark's it was slick with some sort of oily substance. It made Tony chuckle.

'Now hurry up or I'll bite your nose off.'

The trickster licked at the tip of Stark's nose glancing at him with mock anger and it only made Tony laugh more. Now with proper lube he could work his magic. The finger that had trouble penetrating Loki earlier now went in without any problems and soon the inventor added another and started scissoring them. The god shuddered with pleasure, his breath catching. Soon the third finger joined in and Loki started making the most lewd sounds encouraging Tony to hasten his pace. The billionaire let go of Loki's cock eliciting a growl from the deity, dangerously close to his jugular, and instead grabbed for his knee spreading Loki's legs wider and moving the god more on top of himself. His wrist was starting to ache, but soon Loki bated the hand away entirely. With one

last lingering kiss he positioned himself over Tony's hips and never breaking the eye contact grabbed the inventor's cock, stroked it a few times distributing the magic lube all over and guided it to his entrance. They both gasped when the fat head breached the tight ring of muscles and the god slowly lowered himself taking inch after hot inch of Tony's considerable girth inside himself. The engineer couldn't decide if he wanted to look Loki in the eyes or watch his cock bury itself deep inside the trickster's hot, hot ass.

By the time his erection was fully sheathed inside Tony was gasping for breath. The glorious heat surrounding him was almost too much to bare and the inventor's fingers flexed where they rested on the mage's hips.

'God,' Stark stammered looking at his lover with reverence, 'you're so beautiful.'

'Riding your cock?' Loki's pink lips twisted into a smirk.

'There's not much raiding involved yet,' Tony arched a brow staring lasciviously at his lover.

Not needing any more prompting the deity slowly lifted himself all the way up, leaving only the head of Tony's cock inside then sank right back down. The moan that escaped his lips was like music to Tony's ears so next time when Loki was about to take all of his cock in again Stark met him half way thrusting up into the inviting heat of the god's ass. Their pace quickened and Loki was gasping and moaning above him, his black hair bouncing wildly while he was being fucked. The god's neglected erection leaked precome on Tony's belly so Stark grabbed it and started stroking fast observing Loki fall apart above him.

They were both so lost in the rhythm of up and down, and more, and faster, the heat almost unbearable, bodies slick with sweat and saliva, and come. Faster, hotter, more!

Loki was so close his hips stuttered and he fell forward moaning Tony's name when the orgasm claimed him wrecking through his body like a wildfire. Stark stroked him through it, his own cock thrusting still into the trickster's body, warm and welcoming.

'So close,' he sighed against Loki's damp forehead kissing his brow and listening to the god's sweet whimpers. He came after a few more well aimed thrusts, coating Loki's insides with hot spurts of come.

Soon they were both too over stimulated to continue so Tony withdrew from the god and let him roll to the side exhausted, but sated.

Too tired to get up and wash off the mess they made Loki grabbed his forgotten towel and wiped them clean the best he could, earning himself a sleepy smile from the inventor.

'C'mere gorgeous,' Tony slurred tugging Loki against his side and snuggling closer, one hand around the trickster's waist, nose buried in the black, wavy curls. A few minutes later they were both fast asleep.

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## Chapter 31

Pleasant warmth surrounded him on all sides like a cocoon. It was soft and safe and for the first time in years Loki felt content. He opened his eyes and smiled – a blaze of colors assaulted his senses, a phenomenon the god thought he would never witness again: light dancing on the walls, filtered through the great palm trees that grew around Tony's house; a sliver of the sky, blue like his mother's eyes – clear and vast; tan, sun-kissed skin creating a stark contrast to the thin snow-white sheets they slept under; gray among brown... Loki's brow furrowed. He didn't notice it earlier, preoccupied with more important matters, but now that he had a quiet moment to really look at his sleeping lover the god's recovering eyes registered details he was oblivious to earlier. Like the gray strands of hair on Tony's temples, or the worry lines around his lips and eyes. He looked older... Loki noticed with horror; much older and more worn out than he remembered.

The god reached out and buried his fingers in the short, white strands horrified of how much Tony managed to change in those three years. The trickster knew full well that human lives were trifle, that they died easily from injuries that were nothing to gods, but this... this he wasn't prepared to see. Loki's heart constricted painfully as he delicately caressed his sleeping lover's face. It was mortifying – Tony's life was fading away and the way Loki was now he could do nothing to stop it. But soon, soon he would have a way.

Tony scrunched his nose comically before his eyes fluttered open and slowly focused on the god. He smiled a blinding smile upon noticing that the god was awake too.

'Hi gorgeous,' Stark greeted with sleep changed voice stretching deliciously for Loki to admire. And the god drank in the sight, his newly found gaze sliding over the plains of Tony's chest and abs. In spite of the changes the engineer was still in great form; with strong limbs and taunt muscles he was a sight to behold. Maybe not as ripped as Thor or any of the Aesir warriors, but Loki still found him beautiful.

'Good morning,' the god bent forward and kissed the inventor's silver brushed temple; he couldn't get over it.

'What was that for?' Tony giggled puffing his lips out for a proper kiss.

'I'm just glad to see you.'

'I bet you are,' the inventor preened. 'Such a sexy sight first thing in the morning, why would you not be happy to see it?'

Loki snorted, his eyes once again moving over Tony's body.



'Fetching,' he drawled lifting a mocking eyebrow, 'especially the bed hair and spit stain on the pillow.'

Before Tony could come up with a retort the god lifted himself from the pillow and planted his lips to the engineer's effectively silencing any protests he was about to utter.

The kiss was slow and sweet, languid but meaningful, the immortal trying to convey all the feelings he wasn't able to explain with words: the gratitude for being given a second chance without deserving one, the butterflies he felt in the pit of his stomach every time Tony was close, the warmth that spread through his chest from each of Tony's smiles directed at him, the feeling of belonging and safety and most of all *love*. He wanted to thank Tony for so many things, he wasn't even sure where to start.

'I love you,' he breathed out instead when their lips eventually separated, one thumb lovingly caressing Stark's grayish hair. The inventor's pupils dilated impossibly leaving only a thin rim of amber-brown and he had to swallow a few times to convince his vocal cords to start working again.

'I love you too,' Tony finally rasped, voice serious and heavy with plethora of emotions. Loki could hear the inventor's heart fluttering like mad under the arc reactor as he sank down and buried his face under Stark's chin, nosing at his throat and inhaling his unique scent — a combination of coffee, scotch and burned metal.

Instantly the billionaire's arms closed around his ribcage and Loki wasn't sure if he imagined it, but it felt like Tony was suppressing a sob from escaping his body. So Loki snuggled against the mortal's side and peppered his throat with soft, fleeting kisses.

They stayed like that for a while in comfortable silence, Stark's fingers tracing nonsensical patterns over Loki's back and spine, both lost in thoughts until suddenly the inventor's stomach rumbled viciously demanding sustenance.

'Uh,' Tony groaned, 'there goes the mood!' He could feel Loki's body shaking beside him with giggles and he smiled too.

'What do you say about breakfast in bed? I could make some eggs and toasts and we could spend the whole day here just lounging around.'

'Perfect,' Loki smiled disentangling himself from the inventor. He was entirely content to do nothing all day.

'Okay so first a quick shower, then food and coffee. Jarvis start brewing.'

*'Right away sir. If I may add, your luggage from Las Vegas has been delivered an hour ago. It was left on the porch, I would recommend to bring it inside.'*

'Uhm, later J,' Tony batted his eyelashes at the god. 'Shower with me?'

'With pleasure.'

Crawling out of bed Loki noticed how dirty the sheets really were and wrinkling his nose in distaste the god snapped his fingers making the stains evaporate.

'Handy,' Tony whistled taking the mage's hand and leading him to the bathroom.

'It is but a trick,' the deity shrugged.

'Do you have any other magic tricks we could use in bed?' The genius asked genuinely curious.

'Oh yes, *lots*.'

Tony couldn't suppress the shiver of anticipation that ran over his body even if he wanted to.

~

One steamy shower later Tony found himself in the kitchen scrambling eggs and keeping an eye on the bacon. Jarvis was updating him on stocks and weather for the next few days, messages Pepper left and events she planned into his calendar. Life was finally taking a shape he really liked and Tony felt happy.

'*Sir if I may remind you of the luggage.*'

'Busy Jarvis. You know what, take one of the suits and haul it inside, we'll unpack it later.'

'*As you wish sir.*'

Stark was in the middle of depositing their breakfast onto the plates when Jarvis' concerned voice rang through the kitchen.

'*Sir, you might want to step outside.*'

'Jarvis the food will get cold if I leave it like that. What is it? My palm trees are withering again?' The inventor sighed tossing the wooden spatula into the sink.

'*You have... visitors sir,*' Jarvis stated and Tony momentarily stilled.

'What kind of visitors?'

'*Extraterrestrial.*'

'Fuck,' Tony swore thinking on his feet as he hurried to the front door. 'Jarvis prep all the available suits. Do they seem hostile?'

'*They are armed sir.*'

'How many? And where is Loki?' The engineer rounded another corner, his mind buzzing with all the possible scenarios – regretfully after a quick mental simulation 98% of them ended in bloodshed.

Barefoot, only in boxers and a t-shirt Tony went to the front door mentally preparing himself for battle. There was no way in hell he would let them take Loki back to Asgard.

'If things go south notify the Avengers,' the engineer instructed Jarvis and went outside.

He instantly noticed them – a group of warriors all clad in shiny, golden armors heading his way, faces grim under weirdly shaped helmets. Tony recognized the pair at the front from a S.H.I.E.L.D. report he read regarding Thor and his stunt in Puente Antiguo.

'The renaissance fair is in the next city!' Stark shouted out observing their fast trek from the shadow of the porch; a suit controlled by Jarvis stepped next to him, ready for action.

'Protect Loki,' Tony murmured eyeing his *guests*.

'We mean you no harm Man of Iron,' the woman assured when they were only a few meters away; apparently she was the leader of the group. 'We came only to retrieve the war criminal.'

'Uum I don't see any criminals here, it's just me and my buddy Jarvis,' the engineer nodded towards the suit at the same time listening to the AI's report through the comm device he managed to snag on his way out.

'We have information that the former prince of Asgard is staying here,' she continued slowly losing patience.

'Nope, Thor's in New York.'

'The *former* prince, Loki,' she almost growled and Tony watched with fascination how the muscles in her jaw jumped.

'Never heard of him,' the inventor shrugged just as Jarvis confirmed that the suits were ready to deploy.

The warrior hissed and grabbed Tony by the throat lifting the gasping billionaire off the ground.

'Do not play games with us Man of Iron, you may be Thor's shield brother, but it doesn't mean that I will not incapacitate you if the need arise.'

'That's enough Sif,' a calm voice demanded from behind Tony and the engineer trashed in the woman's grip panicked. Why the hell was Loki here?!

'What's with you Asgardians and the throat grabbing?' Stark whizzed when she finally let him go and focused on the god of mischief instead.

'Surrender Loki, we have orders from the All-Father to bring you back to Asgard.'

The guards readied themselves, hands on their swords in case Loki wanted to cause trouble, but the god only made one step forward and planted his palm on the small of Tony's back.

'On what offense?' The trickster asked completely calm and collected as if he anticipated their arrival, and maybe he had and it was only Tony who thought that the storm was over and they could finally move on with their lives.

'I do not know,' Sif spat motioning for the guards to move forward, 'I do not question my king's orders.'

'You questioned mine,' Loki regarded her with coldness Tone never witnessed before. Even towards Thor the god's expression was usually more open and inviting than what he showed to this woman. The air between them almost crackled with tension.

'*You* were never *my* king,' she responded in kind, eyes unyielding and back tense. There was history between them Tony wasn't privy to.

'Ah, but you are mistaken. The throne has been rightfully given to me and you disobeyed my explicit orders, did you not?'

'I do not have time for this nonsense!' Sif cried, hatred brimming from her eyes. She gestured towards the guards and two of them stepped around the woman and advanced towards the pair. Tony noticed some familiar items in their hands: the accursed muzzle and chains.

'Oh hell no!' The inventor pushed Loki back behind himself and glared at the intruders. The cling of unsheathing swords rang through the yard when the warriors fanned out trying to corner them on the porch. 'You will not bind him with that again. Jarvis deploy!'

In seconds the front yard was invaded by a dozen of Iron man suits armed to the proverbial teeth just waiting for Tony's order to strike. After the debacle with the Mandarin the inventor decided to rebuild some of the more specialized suits and now one half of them was stationed at the Avengers Tower and the other here in Malibu. Tony secretly hoped he would never have to use them again, that the Avengers could deal with all the threads, but they were not here and he once again had someone very precious to him to defend.

Stark was sizing his opponents and calculation the odds, glaring daggers at Sif and her cohorts when cool fingers glided over his forearm directing his attention towards the god behind. With the corner of an eye he looked at Loki expecting to see at least a mischievous smirk and some green pyrotechnics, but instead saw a somber expression and resigned eyes.

'Don't,' the god pleaded quietly. Tony turned fully towards him momentarily forgetting about Xena and her lackeys. 'Loki?'

'I will go with them,' the trickster tried to smile reassuringly, but it came out forced. Stark's eyes widened.

'They want to fucking muzzle and drag you in chains to the All-fucking-Daddy's amusement!' Tony shouted waving his hands towards the renaissance group like a madman.

'You will not insult the All-Father mortal!' Sif shouted and was ready to pounce on the engineer, sword eager to pierce his throat.

Seeing as he had no chance of appeasing his lover in front of the hot-headed warrior Loki made an exaggerated motion with his hands, quickly murmuring a well-known formula and magicked an impenetrable forcefield to separate his escort from him and Tony.

'We can outrun them,' Stark whined grasping the god by the hand, 'Jarvis will buy us some time. Loki *come on!*'

The sound of the warriors pounding on the invisible walls resonated through the front yard, their shouts angry, but muffled and slightly distorted cursed the mage and his tricks.

'No *elsker*, I have to go with them and convince the All-Father that I am more worthy to the Avengers with my gifts intact.'

Loki's fingers brushes over Tony's cheekbone and continued their short path to his graying temple. He was worried that renegotiating his punishment with Odin might take too long, but there was no other choice, he would not condemn Tony to a life as a fugitive, always on the run because of him.

Stark's eyes were pleading when he looked at him, brimming with unshed tears and oh so angry — beautiful and fierce, and Loki bowed down his head and planted a kiss on those full, downturned lips committing their softness and shape to memory in case if...

'I will come for you,' Stark blurted out as soon as they parted for breath. 'I will build a fucking Bifrost if I have to, but I will come, you hear me?'

'I'll introduce you to my mother then,' the god smirked proud of the spark of indomitable will his lover possessed.

'You better,' Tony smirked back and reluctantly stepped away casting a hateful glance at the warriors struggling to destroy the barrier. 'Give them hell tiger.'

'Oh I plan to,' Loki waved a hand and the spell protecting them winked out of existence making the Aesir awkwardly stumble forward. Sif recovered first and supported the other, enormous guy and as soon as the rest found a steady footing the guards jumped forward, roughly twisted Loki's hands behind his back and started shackling them, then the muzzle clicked into place and Tony's stomach rolled as bile rose to his throat. But when they god's eyes landed on him again they were unafraid. Then Xena shouted for Heimdall and they were gone in a blinding flash of rainbow light, the only evidence that they were even there was now burned onto Tony's driveway.

The engineer stood a moment longer at the porch gazing at the sky then he turned on his heel shouting orders at Jarvis.

'Get the armors back into the shop and open a new project file. Let's call it... I don't know, think of something. Then start assembling data regarding Asgardians, get deep into S.H.I.E.L.D.'s database if you have to.'

*'Yes sir, the armors are back in their docking stations and the coffee is brewing,'* the AI informed, helpful as always.

'You are a godsend Jarvis.'

Tony made a detour to the kitchen to grab a cup of scalding hot coffee and upon seeing the cold breakfast made a face. He quickly dumped it into trash and fled; the adrenaline rush will keep him going for now, but when it'll start to fade... There was no time to think about it now, he had preparations to make and devices to build that would revolutionize the world if he someday decided to go commercial.

'Jarvis do we have current location of one Dr. Jane Foster? Is she still in London?' Stark asked in between gulps of coffee.

*'Sir, there has been a breach in...'* A static field and then silence rang all around Tony and the inventor furrowed his brow confused.

'Jarvis? Talk to me!'

He made his way towards a command panel, but the device was dead.

'What the...!' Tony murmured. He was about to call Jarvis again when a sound of breaking glass made him freeze in place. As if in slow motion he followed a path of a metal canister with his eyes and watched it roll through the room. Before his mind registered the threat the can hissed and chocking, yellow smoke burst out of it rendering Tony blind. In panic, trying not to breathe and avoid the gas as much as possible Stark stumbled, feeling his eyes starting to sting and throat burn.

*Tear gas* — his mind supplied just as another crash of glass shattering rang through the house followed by a thud of many military grade boots. Then rough hands took hold of his limbs and forced him to his knees.

'Anthony Edward Stark you are under arrest for an act of treason and terrorism...' was the last thing Tony heard before his world went black.

~ ~ ~



## Chapter 32

Blinding light and ringing silence were his only companions in this godforsaken place, and it was slowly driving him mad.

The cell that he'd been stuffed in was pristine white, all sharp angles and edges, and utterly boring. Omnipresent, cold light bounced off the flawless walls hurting his eyes. No guard was stationed outside the small prison cell and no one came to interrogate him when he woke up with a throbbing headache and throat dry as sandpaper. Hours later and his nerves were beginning to fry from anxiety and... well, frankly, from boredom. There was nothing interesting in the cell, just a hard bunk screwed to the wall with a scratchy blanket thrown on top; a toilet without a lid; and a small sink spewing only luke warm water. Lovely.

The 2x2 broom closet was separated from the corridor by a thick, reinforced glass wall that enabled Tony to look outside his box, but only so far. Not that there was anything to see there - the corridor was just as bland and quiet as his cell. There were other - Tony noticed - cells just like his, but as far as he could tell they were all empty. He couldn't say how many, because plastering himself to the barrier allowed him just a small field of view left and right. Wherever he was it looked almost impossible to escape, but he was Tony fucking Stark and he would be damned if he didn't at least try.

He began with checking the walls and the glass. There was a door on the far right also made of thick glass and without a lock, but Tony spied a pneumatic mechanism responsible for keeping it shut, that probably opened remotely from some control room. Which meant that there had to be cameras here. Now that he thought about it for a second, it was rather obvious. His captors, whoever they were (and Tony was fairly certain he already knew who was behind this), would not be so stupid as to leave him unsupervised, the question now was if they were also listening?

Tony sank to the hard bunk bed contemplating his situation. He could sit here and guess all he wanted, but the truth was that right now he couldn't do jack shit.

While he was unconscious his captors stripped him of his clothes and exchanged them for some ugly, gray overalls (Tony checked through the fabric if he still had his underwear and yup they were still there, small graces and such). He was also left without a watch and had no way to measure the passage of time. Without any tools there was just no way for him to make an escape plan, so the only option was to wait for his captors to make the first move.

Unfortunately, Tony was never good at waiting.

~

New York was as always bursting with life. As late afternoon sun kept reaching down to the

throng of people scurrying home after another hard day at work, Steve actively tried to blend in with the crowd, equipped with the standard issue baseball cap and glasses to hide his face from pedestrians. Although he liked talking with his fans, signing autographs and taking photos, it was also very exhausting and time-consuming. But Steve was happy, especially today after visiting Bucky. His friend was doing better, re-acclimatizing into society just like Steve had to do after he woke up in the twenty first century. But he'd had people who made it easier for him and now he wanted to be that kind of support for his best friend.

Whistling some silly song that refused to leave his head Steve strolled unhurriedly back home, bag of groceries in hand, when suddenly his phone started buzzing. The Captain fumbled a little before he fished it from the inside pocket of his leather jacket. Scanning the display his eyebrows rose higher when he spotted the caller's ID.

'Jarvis?' He asked bemused answering the phone.

'*Sir, there is an emergency,*' the digital butler sounded panicked, something Steve never heard before. '*The Avengers are gathering at the tower. I will explain everything when you arrive.*'

'I'm on my way,' the soldier confirmed and before he disconnected the call he could hear Jarvis' distraught voice.

'*Please hurry.*'

Not even ten minutes later Steve marched into the common room at the Tower, surprised that everyone was already there. Everyone except Tony. Clint and Natasha were sitting together on one of the big, comfortable couches conversing quietly, heads close, with Thor hunched on the armrest. Bruce occupied his favorite armchair, a cup of green tea steaming in his hands. What surprised Steve was the presence of Colonel Rhodes silently standing near the floor to ceiling windows.

'Okay Jarvis, we're all here, what's happening?'

'*Sir has been abducted,*' the AI shot, his artificial voice shaking slightly.

At times like this it was easy to forget that Jarvis wasn't really a living, breathing human; he behaved so like them, modulating his voice to convey feelings, worrying about his creator. If Steve were asked to name Tony's greatest invention he would definitely chose Jarvis over the Iron Man suits.

'What do you mean abducted? By whom?'

'*I do not know sir, my data is compromised.*'

'Someone wiped your drives?' Natasha asked, eyes calculating and focused.

'*I cannot say. There is approximately an hour missing from my records; it appears as though my servers were disconnected, but this is theoretically not possible,*' the AI explained.

'Could it have been Tony? Or Loki, what about Loki? Where's he?' The Colonel stepped forward. He seemed calm, but Steve noticed that his hands were gripping the back of the couch too tightly. For him it could be Afghanistan all over again.

'*Impossible, Mister Laufeyson is on Asgard.*'

At this revelation the whole group fell silent for a moment and then started shouting questions all at once. It didn't make any sense, how could Loki be back on Asgard? Why was Tony gone? Maybe he followed the trickster or was abducted by him? Did Loki fool them all?

'Enough!' Steve ordered sharply glancing sidelong at Bruce. The doctor's eyes were beginning to turn green and his hands were gripping the mug so hard it was a miracle that it didn't shatter yet. 'Enough,' the Captain repeated more gently. 'Can you show us the last recorded footage you have?'

*'Certainly sir.'*

The huge screen on the far wall blinked to life and a second later the image divided into four camera views, each displaying footage from various angles.

They watched as Tony made breakfast and listened to his playful banter with Jarvis. On another part of the screen Loki stretched under the thin sheet waiting for Tony to come back. The other two cameras showed the front yard where one of the Iron Man suits was busy hauling the luggage inside the house. Then suddenly it stopped and turned around.

*'Sir, you might want to step outside,'* the Avengers listened to Jarvis' voice and keenly observed the screen.

*'Jarvis the food will get cold if I leave it like that,'* Tony's whining echoed through the room, on the other camera the suit put the suitcase inside the house.

*'You have... visitors Sir.'*

*'What kind of visitors?'* The inventor stilled and the only sound filling the room was that of sizzling bacon.

*'Extraterrestrial.'*

One of the cameras moved and panned out focusing on a group of people advancing towards the house.

*'Fuck,'* Tony swore and when the camera zoomed in on the intruders, Thor repeated his words.

*'Those are the same people that helped you in Puente Antiguo,'* Clint noticed, glancing at the god. Being one of the agents involved in the incident in New Mexico he read the reports and saw the footage from that event.

*'Yes,'* the thunderer nodded looking grim, *'Lady Sif and Volstagg.'*

*'Friends or foes?'* Steve asked, assessing the group. In the meantime Tony had darted from the kitchen and appeared at the front door.

*'Friends to me.'* The god didn't have to explain further, the woman's tone and words did that for him when she demanded for Loki to come out. The super hero group watched her assault Tony and Loki's silent arrival. After that, everything happened in a flash.

*'He can see,'* Bruce spoke for the first time standing up and moving closer to the screen. *'Can you play that fragment again?'*

As the footage repeated Natasha asked:

*'How is that possible? And the magic, he couldn't do that earlier.'*

'The marks on his hands are gone,' the doctor pointed out gesturing to the screen where the Aesir warriors were busy restraining the trickster. A moment later they were gone, and Tony was left alone on the porch. The expression that lingered on his face for a moment almost broke Bruce's heart; he looked devastated, lost and on the verge of tears, but in the next second the inventor's gaze steeled, and the tears were replaced by a sense of purpose. He ran into the house, shouting commands to Jarvis. The last thing they saw before the screen turned into static were blurred silhouettes approaching from a far corner of the garden, all in black military-grade gear and heavily armed.

'What the hell was that!' Clint exclaimed rocking at the edge of his seat.

'Jarvis can you enhance the image?' Natasha stood up and moved closer to the screen, stopping next to Bruce to put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

'Black ops,' she assessed, 'no emblems, professionals. They must have been watching the premises, they knew exactly when to strike.'

'S.H.I.E.L.D.?' Steve looked at the spy duo.

'Hard to tell, but Fury managed to neutralize Jarvis once before,' Natasha shrugged.

After Tony's angry departure to Malibu, Steve had a serious chat with Clint and Natasha about where their allegiance lay, and whether they could be trusted by the Avengers. In the end, the pair had decided to stay.

*'I have reviewed the most recent S.H.I.E.L.D. activity reports,' Jarvis interjected, 'and thus far, there has not been any mention of Mister Stark or any other auspicious operations.'*

'You hacked S.H.I.E.L.D?' The Captain looked towards the ceiling where he knew Jarvis' sensors were located.

*'I will do everything that is within my power to ensure that Mister Stark returns home safely,'* the AI vowed, his artificial voice hard and unyielding.

'Dig deeper, search through the GPS feeds near Tony's mansion around that time, infiltrate military servers, if you have to,' Rhodey stepped forward as determined as Jarvis. 'Just find him.'

~

Tony was almost clawing at the walls. Mentally of course; he wouldn't give his captors the satisfaction of watching him freak out, but he was really fucking stressed right now and the goddamn waiting around for someone to finally show up was taking a toll on his already frazzled nerves. He couldn't tell precisely, but by his estimate he had been imprisoned for more than twenty-four hours now. At some point, during the endless waiting, he drifted off to sleep and when he woke there was a tray with some disgustingly looking gray, brain-like matter sitting on the floor near the door. And Tony was pissed at himself for missing the opportunity to harass the person who brought it, to demand some answers, and for not being vigilant enough in the first place.

After examining the stuff, he decided to try eating only a small portion at first. He wasn't worried about being poisoned, that would be so counterproductive, but he was concerned about what kind of drugs someone probably infused this abomination with; truth serum maybe, or worse. And Tony didn't want to risk babbling something he would regret later. On the other hand, he was so fucking hungry that his stomach was starting to wrap itself around his spine.

The substance tasted as bad as it looked and he had to scoop it with his fingers because someone

was apparently so paranoid that he would use the plastic utensils to escape (damn but even a plastic spork would have been a blessing in this situation!). So Tony chewed mechanically the few bites of his lunch that he dared to eat and washed it down with a few handfuls of water from the sink, all the while thinking about what transpired in the last twenty-four hours, or maybe even forty-eight depending on how long was he unconscious in the first place. And the funny part was that he wasn't even really worried about himself; he was in a situation similar to this once before and he survived, even though he was now sporting a night light from his chest. But hey, he was still here, alive and kicking. Right?

No, he was worried sick about Loki, the image of him in chains and muzzled haunted his short, fitful dream and waking hours. And who could predict what kind of sick punishment Odin would devise this time? Hell, maybe there would be no punishment, maybe he would simply execute Loki on the spot for breaking the bindings and defying him?

A cold shudder washed over Tony's spine; Loki could already be dead... No, he couldn't think like that, Loki was a cunning bastard, he could talk his way out of any situation and there was no reason to believe for this time to be different, right? Right...

Soon, Tony's eyes closed after he exhausted himself with tons of what-if scenarios, and he fell asleep, this time dreaming about chains and wolves and ice.

~

A loud bang resonated through the quiet cells like a crash of thunder, startling Tony so much that he fell off the bunk bed and hit his head on the tiled floor. Swearing like a sailor, he quickly rolled around to face the source of the sound. What, or rather who, he saw made his hackles rise. On the other side of the glass wall stood none other than Nick Fury, one hand on the back of a metal chair, the other gripping a stack of files. His good eye impassively followed Tony's moves while the inventor tried to appear casual as he climbed back onto the bed.

'Finally decided to show up? If you missed me that much you could have just called. I am sure Agent Hill has more pressing matters to attend to than hauling my ass to your kinky dungeon,' Stark spread his arms wide, smiling a nasty kind of grin reserved for the lowest of paparazzi. He should have probably waited for Fury to start the conversation, wait him out, but patience wasn't really Tony's forte, he preferred to just get shit done. 'And damn, Nicky-boy, I did not think you were into the kinky stuff. Now I know just what to get you for Christmas this year.'

The Director just snorted and sat down, opening the file on his lap.

'Trust me Stark, you don't want to end up in my kinky dungeon.'

He turned a few pages, took out a photo and stared at it for a moment before continuing.

'Tell me, what happened between you, Laufeyson, and Doom?'

'No, wait. You're doing it wrong. Where's Coulson? Shouldn't he be the good cop? You would yell and threaten and demand things, then he would come all smiles, double rainbows and Starbucks, and offer me a shoulder to cry on,' Tony made exaggerated gestures to emphasize his meaning, openly taunting Fury.

'You can't have Coulson, he's currently digging up dirt on your company and its CEO,' the master spy smiled pleasantly as if they were talking about the weather.

'Ha! Good luck with that. Pepper is flawless, and even if you'd be able to uncover something, her



lawyers would chew you up for breakfast. The worst she has done was to record a sex tape with me, and if that ever saw the light of the day it would be trending on twitter after five minutes.' Tony sat on the bunk like a cat that just drank the cream. 'By the way, how long are you planning on keeping me in your fish tank? All the white in here, it's making my eyes hurt. You really need to get a new decorator.'

'You will stay here for as long as I want,' Fury growled.

'I have rights, you know. You can't keep me here if you don't have anything on me,' the billionaire shrugged, but he wasn't so sure anymore.

When they went to meet Doom they tried to be cautious, but what if S.H.I.E.L.D. had somehow followed them, or Doom for the matter. What if they had proof? That would be fucking bad and not only for him.

'What have you to say about this then?' Fury plastered the photo to the glass panel and Tony had to stand up to take a better look at it. When he did, he broke out in a cold sweat. The shot was grainy, but the people were still recognizable. There was Doom in the center, with his metal hand extended towards Loki, and the god of mischief looked like he was about to shake it, with Tony standing right behind the trickster, smirking. It appeared as though they had just struck a lucrative deal, but the inventor remembered it differently; the only time Doom touched Loki was when he examined the markings on his flesh.

Fuck, Tony thought trying to come up with some excuse. No one was supposed to know about this, especially not S.H.I.E.L.D.

'Not so witty anymore hm? If this gets out you will be branded a traitor, conspiring with a ruler of a foreign country and a super villain. Selling your weapons to terrorists again? Your stock price would drop so low you wouldn't be able to find it. Shareholders? Gone. What do you have to say to that?'

'I want a phone call and my lawyers.' Tony tried to stay calm, but the prospect of ruining Pepper's, Rhodey's and the other Avengers lives (amongst many others) by merely associating them with him was terrifying. His name besmirched, he could handle; he'd been there before. But not his friends, not as the collateral damage.

'You will get nothing until I get my answers.'

'I am a citizen of the United States of America, I have the right to...'

'You are not on American soil, Stark, and therefore are not within the jurisdiction of that government,' Fury smirked nastily. 'You have no rights here.'

The Director put the photo back where it came from and stood up. 'I'll give you some time to digest the situation,' he picked up the chair and strolled towards the exit, but before he went through the door he looked at Stark one last time. 'Oh and one more thing, I am the nice cop here.'

Before Tony could respond, the door slammed shut and he was alone, yet again.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 33

The grand, golden halls—usually brimming with animated chatter of noblemen and warriors, the hushed tap tap sound of slippers worn by the servants rushing to fulfill their duties, and quiet echoes of armor and weapons clanking as the guards patrolled the nearby corridors—now felt lifeless and dead. The moonlight falling through the arched windows painted every surface it could reach in ghostly gray hues, sharp and cold. The rooms felt more like catacombs of a long-lost civilization, a tomb only wraiths and apparitions were fond of, rather than the warm, inviting home Loki remembered and longed for.

He traversed the familiar passageways—the same ones he and Thor used to play in when they were children—once again cast in chains and surrounded by half a dozen guards. The group haven't encountered anyone on their way from the Bifrost; it was almost as though the people were afraid of the mad prince, the wayward son that had been returned to his realm once again. But Loki didn't feel the connection anymore. For him, Asgard held only distant, but warm memories of his childhood; of mock fights with wooden swords with the guards, Thor one step ahead, laughing; of running through their mother's lush gardens, careful to not trample any of her precious herbs; of history and tactics lessons that he didn't like as a boy, but came to appreciate later when he matured. That was Asgard, not this dead husk it had become; where his frustrations, jealousy, and pain grew stronger with each day, and all his achievements paled in comparison to Thor's; when he stopped being the son of Odin and became merely the second son, always fighting for Odin's attention, and somehow always failing—unless he did something shameful or outrageous, because only then was his father's gaze focused on him.

Like now.

At first glance the throne room appeared deserted, just like the corridors before it. Only at closer inspection Loki noticed the Einherjar, standing motionless under every column. They looked like gilded statues all made from the same mold, each of their faces obscured by a heavy helmet. The air was so stale in the chamber that their capes didn't move even when Loki and his entourage passed by.

A moment later he noticed *her*, the only ray of sunshine in this otherwise dead place. Illuminated by two lonely *Seiðr* torches hanging above the throne stood his mother, the Queen, regal and beautiful as always. But unlike last time when he had been dragged here in chains, her expression didn't show concern; her features remained impassive, a trick she taught him well, and her sky-blue eyes burned with anger. It made Loki falter in his steps, stop for just a second. Odin's rage he could stand, and even fuel more to his amusement, but hers felt like a physical blow to the gut, painful and numbing. He had to avert his gaze from hers, suddenly ashamed, instead focusing on the monarch on the golden throne. The All-Father was looking at him with barely hidden disgust and it didn't faze Loki even a little. The trickster wanted to smile with his scarred lips, show his once-

father that he wasn't afraid of him anymore, but the muzzle prevented him from doing that, so he arched a eyebrow instead and waited for the sentence (deliberately avoiding his mother's gaze).

The staring match lasted for a good few minutes before Odin finally blinked with his one good eye as if waking from a trance.

'You return like a plague, always bringing death in your wake and no matter what restrains I put on you, no matter whose guard I leave you under, *it is never enough*. You are a harbinger of chaos that I'm afraid even I cannot contain,' the All-Father spoke, casting an angry glare at his once-son. He then waved a hand and the muzzle fell off clattering to the ground, enabling Loki to finally smile.

'There is no force under the leaves of Yggdrasil that could stop me. You may try to contain me again, but I promise, none of your prisons can hold me forever.'

'No, you are a slippery serpent, I'm well aware,' Odin paused scrutinizing the unrepentant prisoner. When he spoke again he did so with a hint of regret and weariness. 'You care little for your life and wellbeing, and even the promise of an ax doesn't deter you from causing chaos and destruction.'

'I have very little to lose now when all my life proved to be a skillfully crafted lie,' Loki shrugged, deliberately avoiding looking at the Queen.

'Is that so?' The words sounded like a trap springing to life and the trickster regarded the All-Father with trepidation. What was the old fool scheming? 'Then the mortal that helped you get rid of my bindings too means little to you?'

For a moment Loki's mind was filled with static noise, and it took him a second too long to answer.

'He means nothing,' the prince spat, panicking internally. 'His miserable life is like a speck dust on the wind, annoying, but meaningless.'

*He should have known!* Loki berated himself, frantically thinking of a way to remove Tony from harm's way. It was one thing to gamble with his own life, but when his lover's was at stake the game ceased being worth it. What could he say to persuade Odin to leave Stark be? Should he feign disinterest? The King could kill Tony just out of spite. Reveal his feelings and beg for mercy? He doubted Odin would care much.

Loki stood paralyzed, frozen in spot, trying to come up with a solution to this mess. He never thought—Oh but he should have! It was *so obvious* that the All-Father would try to exploit Loki's only weakness to keep him in check, neatly leashed and muzzled, dangling a bone just out of his reach.

'You will stay in the palace,' Odin's voice tore Loki from his reverie, 'and be accompanied by two guards everywhere you go. You will obey my every wish and act accordingly, and your mortal will not be harmed.'

Loki exhaled audibly, that he could do. It was nothing compared to the thought of being the cause of Tony's death. He would most likely never see him again, unless Odin would allow it on a whim, but that was acceptable. He just had to hope now that Tony wouldn't try to reach him here, it was rather improbable given how less technologically advanced Midgardians were, on the other hand his lover's mind was a piece of art in itself, capable of forcing the impossible into existence.

'I accept,' Loki bowed his head, glad that it ended this way. He would have plenty of time to plot his revenge after Tony's...

'Do not, however, think that your sentence will last only for the remainder of the mortal's life. That

would hardly be any punishment at all,' Odin looked sly delivering the final blow. 'I've sent Eir to Midgard, she's carrying an elixir with a dulled-down extract from a golden apple. She will administer it, granting your mortal a few additional years to live. I have an agreement with the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D.; he will keep the mortal confined.'

Loki's legs went numb under him and he had trouble standing straight. The *one* thing Tony was reluctant to take from Loki was the golden apple. The trickster knew right away that the inventor was afraid of the longevity the fruit granted and the commitment behind such gift overwhelmed him. Loki wanted to wait a few more years, give Tony time to adjust to the idea, to think it through and decide for himself, but now the choice has been taken away from him, the apple's gift forced upon him. Stark would hate it, Loki was sure, and by proxy hate him and that knowledge made his stomach turn and twist with anger so raw he was unable to contain it.

He could feel the blood rush into his head, clouding his mind with rage, quickening his breath and pulse. The god howled like a wounded beast and threw himself sideways aiming his bound hands at the nearest guard's face, intent on clawing his eyes out. Once he did, he quickly grabbed the shrieking warrior's sword, pulled it from its scabbard and attacked another guard before he could retaliate. The blade slid easily between the armor plates and pierced through flesh. Loki buried it deep in the man's stomach and pulled upward, gutting him like a fish. Blind with rage, he dodged an attack from the side and lunged between two other guards; a sharp push and one ended with a broken neck.

**'You!'** Loki snarled at Odin, tossing the lifeless body of the Einherjar at another guard, successfully tripping him. Then he rammed his fisted, bound hands in the face of the next assailant, probably breaking his jaw.

The trickster turned berserker tried to reach the dais upon which the throne sat, but slipped on the bloodied floor and the remaining guards used that moment to grab the chain Loki was bound by at the hip and sharply tug, pulling him off balance.

The prince growled and tried to lash out, but before he managed to turn fully towards his opponents one kicked him to the back of the knee and send him sprawling to the ground. Twisting with pain, Loki tried to catch a breath and get back on his feet, but after the first heavy, armored boot came another, and then another. He felt his ribs give in and break and all he could do was to shield his head. He thought the beating would last forever, until a stern voice pierced through the red fog that had settled across his mind.

**'ENOUGH!'** The Queen ordered and in the silence that followed Loki could hear a pair of soft slippers tapping on the floor, getting closer, then gentle hands were touching his bloody knuckles trying to pry them away. He let the warm fingers roam over his face and scalp, taking comfort in their gentleness. The rage that consumed him just a moment ago started to fade and Loki realized that through his actions he probably sentenced Tony to death. Heaving painfully the trickster tried to grab Frigga's hand but missed, the shackle around his wrist weighing it down.

'There has been enough damage done for today,' the Queen stated icily. 'Take him to his chambers and call the healer. I'll get there as soon as I have words with my husband.'

Loki blacked out when large hands roughly lifted him from the ground.

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When he woke up, Loki noticed that he was lying under an unfamiliar white fur, its long soft strands tickling his chin. Trying to lift himself from the bed appeared to be out of the question at the moment since the small effort made the pain in his abused ribs flare to life again. With an



annoyed huff the trickster lowered himself cautiously onto the mattress, his body sinking into the warm softness in relief, and began scanning his surroundings.

Almost immediately he recognized his own chambers—the familiar shape of the bed posts; carved, heavy chest under the window opposite his bed, that his mother brought him from Vanaheim when he was still very young; his favorite blackwood desk, scarcely lit by the small flame glowing in the fireplace. It cast deep shadows all over the room, painting all furniture with ominous shades and shapes. Something was not right, Loki noticed, but couldn't place the change since he could barely see anything in the darkness. Experimentally he flicked his wrist and sent a weak spell ordering the flame to grow; the *Seiðr* flared green at the tips of his fingers and colorful sparks started flying from the fireplace as the flame rose, bathing the room in faerie of flickering lights. Surprised that the spell actually worked and that his magic was still intact Loki finally could take a better look at his surroundings.

Shelves normally heavy with all kinds of precious and rare books, that Loki collected over the millennia, were empty; the desk usually flooding with maps and scraps of papers – cleared; the lid of the carved chest open and gaping like a mouth of a beast ready to devour its pray. The room was stripped bare of all his belonging, only the heavy furniture remained like skeletons bending down over deserted battlefield. Loki's vision swam, he had real treasures here, rare spellbooks and enchanted artifacts, herbs and potions. All gone now. Years and years of study lost.

The trickster closed his eyes and tried to force down a sob, but failed when the tightness in his chest grew too much to bare. As if waiting for the sound the Queen rushed in, her golden skirts rustling with every step.

'Loki,' she murmured sitting down at the edge of the bed, alarmed by his pained expression. With cool fingers she checked his forehead and cheeks for any signs of fever as she was wont to do when he was small.

'Why?' Loki rasped swallowing hard to get rid of the emotions making his voice tremble.

Frigga's brow creased while she tried to understand what her son was asking about, then it dawned on her and she looked around with sorrow.

'Odin was distraught after you... fell. He ordered the rooms to be cleared from all your belongings. I managed to salvage a few things, mainly your notes and maps. Most of the books are somewhere in the library, the rest, I'm afraid, was destroyed.'

The Queen swept away a stray, black strand from Loki's forehead and when he glanced at her through hooded eyes, the trickster noticed that she looked at him with warmth and love, like only a mother could and he understood then that the anger he saw earlier wasn't directed at him, but Odin. It made his heart lift a little, knowing that he still had her love. After all he'd done she still considered him her son.

'It would have been easier to just execute me instead of this farce.' Loki leaned into her touch, nuzzling his cheek against the soft palm.

'How can you say that!' Frigga exclaimed. 'I begged him not to. Don't throw away your life so easily, there are many who would mourn it.'

'Many?' The mage snorted. 'They would have been better off without me.'

Loki thought of Tony and Odin's threats against him. He knew associating himself with the brilliant inventor would put the human in harm's way, but he disregarded the danger. Being with



Tony made him feel alive again, wanted and loved. Finally, there was a person that appreciated Loki for being just Loki and not a prince of Asgard, brother of Thor, or son of Odin. With Tony he didn't have to fake being interested in a conversation, or force an insincere smile, because the human made him smile and hold his breathe when he delved into a story or an explanation of yet another impossible project. They were equals and partners in crime, and Loki loved it from the bottom of his heart. But because his association with the former price Tony was now a puppet in Odin's schemes and Loki could do nothing to prevent it. Besides if what Odin said was true, and he set in motion a plan to use the apple's power to enhance the mortal's lifespan, Tony would end up blaming Loki for it and come to hate him. It would break the god's heart.

'That is not true!' Frigga protested with a stern voice she always used when her children were being obtuse. 'You are worried about your mortal, it's understandable, but I made Odin promise me not to hurt him.'

'He did so already!' Loki shouted lifting himself up and hissing in pain. 'He never wanted the apple and now its gifts are being forced upon him just to keep me in check! He will watch his friends and family die and then be left all alone. Tell me mother how is that not enough?'

The image of Tony all by himself burned itself into Loki's mind. His heart ached terribly and he wanted to scream, but bit his lip instead to not let out a sound. He felt pathetic enough.

'Oh darling, you cannot know it. I haven't met this man yet, but I'm certain that he's a formidable person since he caught your attention. Don't lose faith love, maybe your father will change his mind if you won't give him more reasons to be mad at you.'

Frigga stroked his bowed head, carding her fingers through Loki's hair. It pained her to watch her youngest son hurt like that.

'He has plans for you,' the Queen continued trying to sound calm and confident, but in truth she worried about Loki. She knew her son well enough to expect trouble in the near future. 'There are diplomatic missions and new treaties to be forged. You could also spend some quiet time in the library. You used to love going there. After the last incident I persuaded him to let you keep your magic. There are certain rules you need to follow however...' as she proceeded to list them Loki's thoughts drifted towards Midgard and his brilliant inventor. He hoped Tony was well in spite of Odin's words. Frigga was right, he had time now, he would think up a way to get Tony out of this mess.

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## Chapter 34

The sharpie wavered in his hand drawing an uneven line across the surface.

'9192631770 periods of the radiation corresponding to the transition between the two hyperfine levels...' Tony muttered scribbling away on the glass panel. He finally managed to convince Fury to give him something to write with, to help fight the boredom by busying himself with writing equations for some of his minor, harmless projects.

He wasn't sure how long he has been held captive - a week, two? There was no way to measure time in this place; the meals came in irregular intervals, the lights stayed turned on 24/7 and his only guest showed up whenever it pleased him. This, along with having absolutely nothing to do, was driving Tony mad. They gave him nothing (except the sharpie), demanded nothing, and he couldn't bribe them with money. Stark was at a loss for what to do. So far the cell proved to be impervious to his genius, there was absolutely no way to open it from within. S.H.I.E.L.D. did their homework, he had to give them that.

Tony squeezed the bridge of his nose, he now had a constant headache thumping dully inside his skull. He assumed it was due to some drugs his captors somehow managed to dose him, or a combination of stress and worry.

The engineer looked at the half finished equation he was currently working on and sighed; he couldn't concentrate at all today. Just in the last hour (by his vague perception of time) he had to rewrite it three times, because it made no sense.

Today his thoughts constantly returned to Loki because of a dream that haunted him the last time he slept. The inventor could almost feel the god's deft fingers carding lovingly through his matted hair, massaging his scalp and tracing nonsensical patterns over the nape of his neck, smiling one of the rare, genuine smiles that he sometimes graced Tony with. There were no words exchanged in the dream, just sensations of warmth and safety, something that his current accommodation severely lacked.

Exhausted, Stark gracelessly flopped down to the small bed, throwing the sharpie onto the scratchy blanket and closed his eyes. The feeling of failure was weighing on his shoulders worse than any armor he ever wore, crushing his confidence. At this point he had probably nothing to fight for anymore - as far as he knew Loki could already be dead; Pepper, his brilliant, precious CEO was better off without him, not having to babysit the genius billionaire anymore on every step; the Avengers were a capable lot and could easily manage one member short; Rhodey also had more important things to do than to always indulge Tony's whims and stupid, self-destructive ideas. No, Tony wasn't necessary in their lives, he was usually the source of grief anyway, always fucking shit up. But there were those he was worried about; without his supervision, his bots were a mess. Of course Jarvis would take good care of them, but Tony's heart clenched painfully at the thought of Dummy sitting motionless in the dark workshop, alone and abandoned, or U and Butterfingers turned off and lifeless, or worse – dismantled.

The inventor thumped his head on the wall, frustrated by his inadequacies. He stayed like that, drowning in self-pity for some time, drifting between consciousness and uneasy sleep, when suddenly an unexpected sound tore him from the black spiral of despair. Three soft taps on the glass wall separating the cell from the corridor. Without opening his eyes to check who the visitor was, Tony assumed that Fury came again to harass him with boring questions; but when the sound repeated, the engineer slowly opened his bloodshot eyes and blinked, not believing the image he saw. At the other side of his prison stood Natasha, dressed in all black, hair neatly pulled into a

tight bun on the nape of her neck, impatience written all over her pretty face.

'Don't move,' she warned. 'We are looping the footage so it's best for you to stay in the same position.'

With great effort Tony suppressed the urge to jump up from the bed and demand to be released, instead he just nodded remembering that his cell could be bugged.

'We disabled all communications for now, you can speak,' she looked around assessing the surroundings. 'We don't have much time, tell me what the hell did you do to end up in here, because Jarvis refused to share.'

The spy took out a small box from her utility belt and began scanning the panel near the door.

'How am I supposed to know you aren't working with Fury?' Tony asked. 'You betrayed me once before.'

'It was with good intentions and I didn't know that Fury would authorize an attack on the tower,' Natasha didn't look up at him, concentrating on the panel instead. Tony could swear that she looked slightly ashamed, but it could've easily been an act. 'Are you here because Loki can see again? Jarvis showed us the footage from your house in Malibu, and Bruce pointed it out.'

The panel pinged, flashing a red warning and Natasha scowled, displeased and muttered something about security upgrades.

'Yeah, we managed to break Odin's bindings,' Tony closed his eyes again remembering Loki's beautiful face from that fateful morning; his fingers flexed at the edge of the mattress.

'How?'

'It doesn't matter.'

Natasha shrugged, not intent at pursuing the topic at the moment, and continued working on the lock. Suddenly her head snapped up in alarm.

'*блядь!* Clint says that Fury is on his way here,' she swore and started to back away.

'Wait! If you really want to help, tell Jarvis to activate protocol Rescue.'

'What does it do?' Natasha asked glancing at the door at the end of the corridor.

'It will protect Pepper,' Tony sighed, closing his eyes again.

'I will. Hang in there Tony, we will get you out.'

He wanted to believe her, he really did, but it could've been another one of Fury's traps – send in Widow to plant a seed of hope in him and dig for useful information. Yet at this point he wasn't sure what more they could want from him. Security codes to his lab and suits? Even Pepper didn't know them all and had only limited access to his more volatile work. Schematics for the arc reactor? Yeah, not happening. So maybe, just *maybe*, Tony mused, listening to two pairs of footsteps approaching, Natasha really came here to bust him out.

Tony recognized Fury's heavy pace, but couldn't place the other one, lighter and faster. Aside from Natasha's surprise visit he didn't get other visitors, just the Director's glaring self.

Curious, Stark stood up from his spot and peered through the wall to ceiling window. The new

visitor turned out to be an older woman Tony never seen before. She appeared to be in her late fifties and the unimpressed glare and a tight, simple bun at the back of her head made her look like a strict teacher, one of those matrons Tony hated the most as a child. But what intrigued him were her clothes, because heavy, golden robes, as far as he was aware, were not the hit of the season. Asgardian then, but why was she here? Did Odin send her to retrieve him and put him on trial in Asgard? Why not a squad of guards like the party that came for Loki? Or maybe it was Frigga, Loki told him quite a lot about her and his description kind of fit her – blonde, tall and regal.

When they stopped in front of Stark's cell the woman looked him down from head to toe, and the gaze she cast his way made Tony feel very uncomfortable – he felt as if she looked through him and learned all of his secrets. Fury stood motionless half a step behind her, his expression unreadable.

'Anthony Stark?' The woman asked in surprisingly gentle tone.

'Yeah,' Tony's questioning look jumped to Fury for a moment, then back to her. Yet before he could open his mouth to say anything more the alien lady continued.

'My name is Eir. I have been send here by the All-Father.'

'I guessed as much, what does he want?' Stark's mouth twisted down in disgust.

'You managed to sparked the King's curiosity and thus have become a part of his plans,' Eir explained.

'What plans?' Tony asked alarmed; he didn't want to be in any of Odin's plans. He glanced at Fury again, but found no support there.

'It is of no concern to you.'

A movement caught Stark's attention and his eyes widened when he spotted a weird looking syringe in the woman's hand. He tried to take a step back, but his legs almost instantly bumped into the bed.

'What do you want from me?'

'It is time, Director,' the Asgardian ignored Tony's panicked call, focusing instead on Fury.

The superspy nodded and took out a short-range communicator from his pocket.

'Do it,' he ordered curtly avoiding Tony's eyes.

A loud hiss, as if the pressure in the cell was being leveled, alarmed the inventor and he craned his head to look up. A milky fog-like gas was being rapidly released into the cell and Tony stepped away from its source in a wan attempt to protect himself from its effect.

'What the fuck Fury!' He shouted observing with trepidation the fog's descent.

'Sleeping gas, courtesy of Howard Stark.' Fury grinned.

The Director watched with mild curiosity as Tony stumbled into a corner and slid down the wall to the tiled floor, clutching the gray blanket to his nose and mouth in a weak attempt to ward himself from the effect of the chemical concoction. Once the engineer's head lolled to the side, Fury barked another order to his comm unit.

'Vent it out and open the door. Let's get this done quickly.'

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From her hideout in the ventilation Natasha observed Fury's arrival with the unknown woman and their short exchange with Tony. When the sleeping gas was deployed, she almost gave herself away wanting to rush down to the cells level and stop the Director, but the years of training helped her to stay still and instead gather and catalog information about the Asgardian that came with Fury. She did something to frighten Tony, but from her perch Natasha couldn't see what it was. When the cell was safe to enter again, the women went inside and stayed there for a few minutes, but the Widow couldn't see what she did.

'It is done,' she said once she emerged and joined Fury again.

'And you are sure this won't kill him instead? I don't want to have to deal with having a dead Stark on my hands.'

'The formula was dulled down, aside from some pain from the assimilation process it should not be overly dangerous,' Eir explained as they started towards the exit. 'Of course, it was never used on a Midgardian before, but I am confident in my craft.'

'Of course,' Natasha heard Fury's bitter response before the doors slammed close behind them. She waited a moment in case someone came back, then whispered into her comm.

'Did you see that?'

'Yes,' there came a short answer. 'Secure the camera and come back, we won't be able to extract him now. We'll have to see what they did to him and come back another time,' Steve sighed; on another channel Natasha could hear Clint curse a blue streak.

'Does Thor know who the woman is?'

'Yes, but I'll explain everything when you and Hawkeye get back.'

'Understood. Widow out.'

'Be safe,' Steve said before the comm cracked and went silent.

~

The atmosphere in the conference room felt loaded and heavy. The Avengers, backed up by Colonel Rhodes and Pepper Potts, watched the video Natasha managed to capture during her run in the S.H.I.E.L.D. facility.

The breakthrough in finding Tony came from Jarvis, of course. Together with Rhodey, the pair had developed a persistent, learning algorithm that, when faced with an encrypted section of data hidden behind some firewalls, could not only successfully decrypt it, but did it very fast, once it learned the key to the code. Thanks to that Jarvis could go through terabytes of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s data concentrating only on specific keywords without having to waste resources on unimportant files. It still took him almost five days of constant work to find his creator.

Watching the footage, they took in Tony's disheveled, unhealthy look; the pallid skin, dark circles under his eyes and overgrown beard he used to groom to perfection. It was apparent that he didn't sleep much there, if at all, and the way his hands sometimes trembled playing with the sharpie was painful to look at.



When the gas was deployed and Tony collapsed into a corner, the Colonel shot up from his chair and started pacing around the big table, his eyes still glued to the screen. He couldn't believe that Tony once again got kidnapped and had become someone's prisoner, that he, *once again*, failed to keep his best friend safe.

'What did they give him?' Rhodey looked to Thor, who sat at the end of the table, a thunderous look on his face.

'I am not certain,' the god started, 'Eir, the woman that you see here is Asgard's greatest healer and an accomplished alchemist. I could name a dozen concoctions that she might have given Tony based on the color and density of the liquid, yet what I believe was in the syringe doesn't make any sense.'

'Why is that?' Steve asked.

'The All-Father would never allow it,' Thor's fingers fidgeted with Mjolnir's leather strap. 'It is forbidden for any mortal to come in touch with it.'

'With what?' Bruce took off his glasses and wiped them at the rim of his shirt. It took a great effort for him to stay calm, for once he wanted to just hulk out and grind S.H.I.E.L.D. into the ground; but not yet, first they had to rescue Tony.

'Iðunn's apple. It's a source of our longevity and resilience. Only the All-Father has access to them and can decide who is worthy of the honor to receive one. Why would they want to give it to Tony is beyond me.'

'Yeah, your dad isn't very altruistic, so maybe it's something else?' Clint twirled his thumbs watching the recording end and switch to life feed. Tony was still slumped in the corner where Fury and the Asgardian lady left him.

'I cannot say,' Thor shook his enormous blond mane.

'Ultimately it doesn't matter,' the Captain said standing up, 'we know where he is, we now have to come up with a rescue plan.'

'Oh! Jarvis activate protocol Rescue,' Natasha ordered looking at Pepper, 'Tony said it is for you.'

'For me? What does it do, Jarvis?' The redhead asked looking up to the ceiling, she knew that the AI's sensors were everywhere, but it was a habit hard to get rid of.

'It is a contingency plan in case of Mister Stark's death,' the AI informed. 'All of Mister Stark's assets now legally belong to you. Also there is a suit waiting for you in the workshop, Mark Alpha-05, codenamed *Rescue*, a fully functional Iron Man armor that was built just for you, Miss Potts.'

'Oh Tony,' Pepper sighed trying to hold back tears.

Being gifted one of the Iron Man suits was the greatest confession of affection Tony was capable of and a big damn honor reserved to those closest to him. And the name was also very significant because, to Tony, Pepper always was the one rescuing him, helping him and looking over him; she was his hero, and she would be damned if she didn't try to help rescue him again.

'Jarvis, I want to see it,' she demanded with a resolute voice, all hints of tears gone.

*Wait a little longer Tony, she thought to herself, we're coming to get you.*

## Chapter 35

It was almost midnight when Steve decided to run surveillance. He quietly went by the common room where Bruce slept on one of the couches, a white fleece blanket carefully thrown over his prone form, probably by Natasha—whose red mane peaked, barely visible, over the armrest of her favorite loveseat. Tiptoeing lightly, the Captain grabbed a glass of water from the kitchen and continued to the elevator.

They were all reaching their limit—exhausted both physically and mentally, worrying about Tony and Loki (Steve never imagined that he would be worried about the trickster, as if he was a part of the team, *his team*) as the situation progressed from bad to worse.

Not long after their return from the failed rescue mission, when they were still discussing the best way to extract Tony from the S.H.I.E.L.D. facility, Jarvis alerted them that a group of operatives entered the inventor's cell and dragged his unconscious body out.

When they returned him hours later—with Tony sagging lifelessly between two S.H.I.E.L.D. goons—they dropped him on the bed and left, but this time a pair of heavily armed agents remained outside the cell, guns at the ready as though they expected that Tony might try to burst through the glass wall upon waking. But it was only after Natasha demanded that Jarvis replay the short video sequence—zoomed in on Tony and slowed down—that the real horror unfolded before their eyes; red, angry bruises marred the unconscious man's wrists, ankles, and throat.

Bruce was the first to react, shooting out of his seat and stumbling wide-eyed to the elevator. The doors barely managed to close behind him before an angry, gut-wrenching roar echoed throughout the tower, rattling the windows.

'Oh my god,' Pepper gasped, shaken to the core by the sight of her best friend being unceremoniously dropped onto the thin plastic mattress. Her lower lip trembled as she fought to control herself; Steve recalled her muttering to the Colonel that Tony had looked better when he returned from Afghanistan, compared with the wreck of a man on the screen, his face white as a sheet with dark rings under his closed eyes and lips chapped bloody. The angry red splotches that peeked out from under his thin white t-shirt looked raw and painful, as if someone had restrained him; the same marks bloomed on his bare ankles and wrists.

The whole room fell silent, horrified at the image before them.

'Torture,' Rhodey breathed out, 'of all the things they could do.' The Colonel's fist heavily connected with the table resulting in a loud bang. 'They were supposed to be our allies!'

'We need a plan,' Steve blurted out. He couldn't tear his eyes away from the lifeless body of his friend. It reminded him vividly of Bucky, when he first found him in the Hydra base so many years ago. 'We need to get him out as soon as possible.'

'We can't,' Natasha's calm voice carried through the room. She gestured towards the screen. 'We don't know what they did to him. They might have injected him with something harmless, truth serum maybe, so he would tell them what they wanted to know. But the liquid might have contained nanoparticles of unknown function that now course through his veins and might be triggered to harm if he leaves the facility,' she bit at her lip, thinking.

It was possible, S.H.I.E.L.D. had many secret projects that only a selected few knew about. Steve wouldn't put it past them to inject Tony with something lethal just to keep him in check.

'First, we need more data, then we'll come up with a plan,' Natasha continued.

'How do you propose we do that? Our faces are known to probably every S.H.I.E.L.D. operative there is,' the Captain sighed. The situation was looking really bad.

'I'll find a way,' Natasha declared.

Despite all his weird habits and questionable relationship choices, Steve was sure that Natasha genuinely liked Tony; heck, they all did. He was a good, caring friend, even if sometimes he showed it in unusual ways; they knew that he cared for them, like he would care for family. She failed him the last time, when she withheld information about the surveillance planted in the tower, and they had parted on bad terms. Steve suspected that she was feeling guilty about that and maybe even blamed herself for their current predicament, because if not for their fight Tony and Loki would still be in the tower.

The elevator chimed and the door swung open to reveal a dark corridor. The Captain stepped outside, careful to avoid bumping into any potted plants that stood under the walls. It was eerily quiet and still; even the sounds from the streets far below could barely penetrate the thick atmosphere that hung in the air. Steve took a deep breath and entered a room to his left. His eyes were instantly assaulted by a sharp, blue light coming from a dozen or so screens sat next to each other to create a wall of moving lines of code on one side and surveillance from the S.H.I.E.L.D. facility on the other.

'He's still not back,' a voice announced from behind him making the Captain flinch and sharply turn around.

'What are you doing here?' Steve asked glancing at his teammate.

'I couldn't sleep,' Clint shrugged pushing himself away from the wall. He stepped next to Steve and for a few minutes they both stared silently at Tony's empty cell.

'I'm worried too, you know,' Barton suddenly said, his voice no louder than a whisper.

'I never said you weren't.'

'Just because I don't agree with his life choices doesn't mean that I don't care. It's just, you know, of all the people that threw themselves at him, he had to choose that fucker. Just seeing them together makes me want to puke,' the archer ranted, his eyes never straying from the unchanging footage. They came for Stark earlier that day; it was the fourth time already and every time they brought him back he looked even worse than before.

'I want to be angry, like super pissed at them both, because what Loki did—' Clint stopped, voice unable to squeeze through his constricted throat. A violent shudder shook his body and Barton exhaled slowly to calm himself.

'I want to be angry, but I can't. Because you know what? They fucking fit together, and Stark is happy. He deserves to be happy.'

'We all do, Clint,' Steve put a hand on the archer's shoulder and squeezed. He wasn't aware that Loki's presence had made such an impact on Clint; the Widow reassured him that Barton could take it, when they first discussed the arrangement.

'Yeah...' Barton coughed, his gaze wandering over the walls and ceiling. 'I think, I'm gonna go. Jarvis is keeping watch anyway.'

'Get some rest, you're going with Widow tomorrow,' Steve nodded and smiled reassuringly. 'We'll get him back.'

'Absolutely,' Hawkeye grinned too, but they both knew that it would not be easy.

~

Loki could feel his fingers constrict around the guard's throat, flexing as the air supply was slowly cut away; he could feel the man's panic bubbling in his chest, unable to come out through the closed windpipe. He drank in that feeling of helplessness, the same one he felt day after day being unable to get any news about Tony. The trickster sighed, letting the image of his hands around the guard's throat vanish from his mind. In the last few days he fantasized way too often about strangling both of his silent watchers. They were worse than Thor when he used to tag after Loki everywhere trying to persuade him to participate in another 'grand adventure', the younger prince refusing each time until he was too incensed with his brother to tolerate his distracting presence any longer. He usually managed to scare Thor off with magic or angry glares, but his two new shadows were immune to such tactics. They followed him everywhere, even into his chambers, which made Loki's frazzled nerves fry even more. He was worried about Tony, not able to determine if Odin's threats were real or invented only to keep Loki in check.

The trickster paced his room hissing profanities, cursing the All-Father; the guard that stood near the door, his eyes tracing Loki's path; and even himself for being unable to act.

He met Eir earlier that day, but she had refused to share any information regarding her brief stay on Midgard, explaining that Odin forbid her talking to Loki. It made the trickster furious, his usually calm mask cracking under the strain of constant worry and he started shouting at her and had to be dragged away by his guards—hissing and spitting curses left and right. He was now confined to his chambers, forbidden to go outside like a small child that had misbehaved and was now being punished for his outburst.

Loki felt powerless, totally useless; his every attempt at scheming was thwarted even before it could fully form. He was forbidden from venturing into the city to seek acquaintances; he was forbidden to touch any spellbooks in the library in case he found something in there that he shouldn't; he was even forbidden to spar or train altogether, unable to vent all the pent up anger that boiled in his veins. The All-Father rendered him powerless, truly and utterly powerless.

The dinner was brought to him by a meek-looking serving girl who refused to meet his eyes and tried to keep as much distance between them as possible. Loki, being at the end of his tether, snapped at her.

'Bring it here,' he growled, one hand flying in a mocking arch to indicate where she should deposit the tray. 'Surely you do not expect me to do your work for you?'



The servant flinched, but came closer, all the time avoiding looking at him, eyes cast low and scared.

'Serve me,' Loki demanded, when the tray landed securely on the table next to him. He knew he was being petulant, scaring a child, but it was the only shred of control he still possessed and he meant to use it. The trickster watched dispassionate as the servant picked up a carafe with trembling hands and attempted to pour him wine without spilling it. She failed miserably and was at the verge of tears when all Loki's anger evaporated and turned into apathy.

'You can go,' he sighed waving the girl away. She curtsied and ran from the room in a blink of an eye, leaving the trickster in a sour mood. It was only the beginning; how was he supposed to live through millennia of this uncertainty?

~

Loki could not sleep that night, plagued by unclear visions of Tony and a sense of fear. He woke time and time again, drenched in cold sweat, heart hammering against his ribcage like a bird trapped in a too small a cage. Near dawn, he finally gave up and just laid back, wide-eyed on the bed, covers askew and the heavy pressure of anxiety crushing his chest.

He missed the damn mortal and his constant chatter; his warm laugh and sense of humor; the rough, worn fingers that could be surprisingly gentle when he wished to; lips capable of uttering the most wicked lies as brilliantly as the painful truths. And the eyes—most precious ambers—warm and attentive.

Loki whined, one hand flying up to cover his face. He never thought he would fall so hard for a short-lived Midgardian, much less an enemy that had bested him in battle. But the Norns could be cruel at times, their tapestries and schemes unpredictable.

The trickster sighed and stood up from the bed, wiping the moisture from his eyes as he shuffled towards the bathing chambers. The doors leading to the other rooms were wide open and one of the infuriating, silent sentries stood watch just outside, his piercing eyes following Loki's every step. He did not care anymore, let them watch and judge. The god's robe slid from his pale shoulders and fell to the ground as he stepped through the threshold of the bathing chamber, bare feet making barely any noise on the elaborate mosaics depicting wild beasts whirling with mighty warriors in a deadly dance. With a flick of a wrist, Loki heated up the water lapping against the rim of the big basin in the center and waited for the steam to start rising from the surface. When it did, the trickster slid from the edge with a sigh, welcoming the soothing touch of the small waves his body created. Almost immediately, Loki's dark locks started to curl from the moisture in the air and he dived under water to tame them. When he surfaced, he noticed the guard hovering in the entrance to his bedroom, uncertain if he should advance or stay his ground. Loki smirked, a devilish plan forming in his head. He swam to the opposite side of the basin and situated himself on a step just above the water surface, half hidden in shadow between two Seiðr torches casting around a gentle, turquoise light. Certain of the guard's full attention the trickster summoned a jar of scented oils and took himself in hand. Closing his eyes, he imagined that it was Tony's rough palm slowly stroking his hardening erection and moaned when the image fully formed in his mind. The mortal stood captured between Loki's thighs, his sun kissed skin a stark contrast to the god's, moist with sweat and steam. His eyes gazing up, hooded with long eyelashes, were filled with lust and adoration, a mischievous spark lighting them up after an especially wicked twist. He would then bend down, showering Loki's chest and abdomen with a myriad of nips and kisses, teasing his hardening nipples between sharp teeth, sucking on them, at the same time working on Loki's cock, calloused thumb grazing the slit and smearing the leaking precome all over.



Loki mewled, his hips thrusting up, cock red and heavy in his hand.

Oh, he could feel his lover's lips closing around the sensitive crown, tongue lapping at the slit, teasing him. Tony would go lower, taking the cock all the way down, never breaking eye contact with his god, watching him come undone by the skilled mouth.

The trickster's strokes sped up, oil leaking between his fingers mixed up with precome. It felt so good that Loki's gasps and whimpers took on a higher note, echoing throughout the chamber. His second hand found its way to his balls and the god started massaging them, overwhelmed by the pleasure and the fantasy playing in his head. He came with a shout, Tony's name spilling from his lips as his hand and abdomen was coated with thick, white strands of come. He imagined Tony drinking it all, milking him to the last drop, lips red and swollen around Loki's spent cock, smirking playfully.

Loki opened his eyes, the god's chest heaving after the orgasm, and keened. There was no Tony between his knees to smile at or kiss; he was alone, guarded day and night by Odin's trusted sentries, without anyone to take his mind off the mortal he left on Midgard. Loki slid back into the water, the afterglow evaporating like steam all around him and sobbed quietly, creating waves to disguise the wretched sound. He never felt so alone.

~

The Bifrost glowed under his feet the same exact way it used to when he and Thor were still children. It astounded Loki how fast Odin managed to rebuild it. No doubt it took enormous amount of effort and resources, but having it out of commission put Asgard at a major disadvantage.

He wanted to see how far the guards would let him go before they turned him back and so far they just kept their distance and let him stroll through the rainbow bridge. The trickster kept to the center of the colorful surface, trying not to look at the void stretching for light-years all around him; it made him feel small and unimportant.

The golden dome glowed in the faint starlight even more magnificent than it used to be before everything went to Hel. The Bifrost's spire stood erect, pointing at the black sky, ready to be used at any moment, yet not for Loki.

The god, tailed by his silent sentries entered the observatory, calm and collected on the outside, but trembling internally.

'How fare the Nine Realms, Gatekeeper?' He asked.

'There are always turmoils present under the branches of Ygg'drasil, some might be hidden, other for all to see, but they never cease existing.' Heimdall turned his otherworldly eyes towards Loki—they shone with light of many galaxies, all-seeing and ever-watchful. 'I cannot tell you how *he* fares, the All-Father forbade it.'

Loki's lips formed a thin, angry line. It wasn't enough to separate him from Tony, Odin had to prevent him from obtaining any kind of information about the inventor.

'However,' the Watcher continued, his voice low, so only Loki could hear him. 'You once told me that there are other ways to travel through the Nine Realms. There are also other ways to gaze through them.'

The trickster's eyes went wide; *how could he forget!*

'You have my thanks,' Loki breathed out bowing slightly. A plan immediately started forming in his head as he spun around, a spark of hope waking to life in his heart. Then a thought occurred to him.

'Heimdall, what of Thor?'

'I hear him calling, yet he must remain stranded on Midgard.' The Gatekeeper's golden gaze returned to the void again.

'Until the All-Father decrees otherwise, no doubt,' Loki sighed, not surprised at all.

'Just so.'

Without wasting more time the trickster exited the dome and began the long journey back to the palace, his head abuzz with plans. But first, he needed to find his mother; without her, all his schemes would be impossible to execute.

~

He came upon her in the royal gardens; surrounded by an entourage of handmaidens as she made her rounds, inspecting plants and dictating orders on how to groom them. Loki waited in the shadow of an old ash tree for the right moment to present himself, and when it came, he stepped out onto the cobbled path and bowed deeply.

'Mother,' he smiled, noticing how some of the ladies seemed to step back and away from him; what stories were circulating the court to prompt such reaction?

'Loki my dear!' Frigga exclaimed, delighted that her son finally came to visit. Leaving her entourage behind she hastened towards him, skirts flowing over the grass like mist. His mother's bright smile made Loki's worries feel less daunting just for a moment so he smiled back at her, their hands linked.

'Would you walk with me? Alone,' he asked casting a glance towards his guards standing at attention not far away. The Queen's expression sobered as she nodded, quickly recognizing the anxiety behind her son's pleasant smile.

'Leave us, I wish to spend time with my son,' Frigga ordered and the handmaidens hastily dispersed chatting animatedly among themselves. 'You too,' she waved at the sentries. One of the men hesitantly stepped forward bowing his head respectfully.

'By the King's orders we are to accompany the Prince everywhere he...'

'I am aware of the King's orders, but I am your Queen and I order you to stand guard under the garden's gates, we wish to converse in private.' Frigga's demeanor changed from warm and motherly to that of a stern ruler and the sentries quickly bowed and went away without another word. She waited until they were out of earshot to ask.

'What troubles you, Loki?'

'I need your help,' he stated, voice serious.

~

Grand columns span the entire throne room on both sides, supporting the high, golden ceiling. Loki observed from shadows at the far end of the vast chamber, hidden behind the throne, the

Einherjar's arrival as they released their comrades from the guard duty. It was way past midnight, the throne room empty of any petitioners and court members.

Benefiting from the commotion, Loki took the chance and released an illusion he wove earlier and cast it over the throne, ensuring that no one would be able to see him when he took the seat. It was a great risk, but it was also the only chance he had to check up on Tony.

With his mother's support and skill, he managed to slip away from his sentries - Frigga's illusion taking his place - and had time to prepare the spell he needed to deceive anyone still present in the throne room.

Slowly, careful to not alert the guards he slipped onto Odin's high seat; it was once his—for the briefest of moments—and he knew how to use its powers. Concentrating on Tony, he willed his mind to follow the connection between them so he could see the man, to check if he was well.

He felt the connection snap into place and solidify, but he wasn't prepared for the onslaught of panic and pain that followed. Nails digging into the golden armrests, Loki willed himself to relax and focus, isolate the overwhelming emotions that radiated from his lover's mind and see him instead. It wasn't easy since his own panic began to rise and bubble in his chest, something was very wrong with Tony, and Loki was literally worlds away and unable to help him.

The time and space bent to his will and with his mind's eye, Loki was finally able to see his lover, and he regretted it the moment the image became clear.

He saw Tony strapped to a steel gurney, writhing and cursing, hands and feet under the reinforced leather bindings raw and bleeding, with S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel gathered around bending over him. The image wavered as Loki fought to maintain control over it and at the same time sustain the illusion around him, but he could clearly see the gaping hole in Tony's chest where the arc reactor once sat; it was now empty with only the outer casing intact, still embodied into Tony's ribcage.

They were torturing him and it was all Loki's fault. If it wasn't for him, this would have never happened.

Loki tried to suppress a sob, biting hard on his lower lip as he watched in horror. Tony looked like death—complexion pallid, with dark circles under his eyes and sweat soaked hair. He was dressed only in light, gray pants, chest bare for all to see; exposed and unprotected. He screamed and cursed at the bastards around him, but they ignored him, focused instead on their tablets and data displayed there.

The god heaved a sigh once again and suddenly he was unable to breathe, a steel hold crushing his windpipe. The image of Tony wavered and disappeared, causing a surge of energy that was forced back into the trickster's mind, confusing him. His eyes flew open, unfocused gaze trying to make sense of the images before him. He could feel his body being lifted from the throne and tossed aside. Coughing, Loki looked up into Odin's furious face, red from anger.

'You dare!' The All-Father bellowed, spit spraying from his lips.

'Please, please, no. I—I need to see him— help him,' Loki rasped, his throat sore and hurting from Odin's manhandling. He tried to stand up, but his head swam and bile rose to his throat. Almost blinded by the whiplash caused by the energy surge, he crawled towards the throne, Tony the only thing in his mind.

'Take him away and throw him into the dungeon,' Odin growled and instantly hands were on Loki's shoulders hauling him up and away from the throne.

'No! Please, father, *please!* You promised! You promised not to hurt him!' The trickster fought against the force pushing him back, but he was weak, the connection so brutally severed had burned his mental shields and Seiðr reserves. The hands holding him were strong, too strong. He could not win.

His pleas echoed from the tall columns of Valaskjálf, but there was no one who would listen.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 36

'When did you become so cruel, Odin? I do not even recognize you anymore!' Frigga shouted at her husband's retreating back, their hurried steps towards the palace's royal wing echoing against the golden walls.

'He only got what he deserves. I shouldn't have listened to you in the first place,' the All-Father growled, refusing to meet his wife's eyes. 'A warm bed and the freedom to roam the palace!' He snorted. 'Loki should have been thrown into the dungeon from the beginning. That's where he belongs!'

'How can you say that?!' Frigga cried finally catching up to her husband. 'He's your son!'

'He is not!' Odin turned abruptly towards her, his face twisted with fury. The Queen's eyes widened in shock, the force of the statement hitting her almost like a physical blow. A few hot tears rolled down her reddened cheeks as she took a step back, away from her husband.

'He is *my* son,' Frigga said, wiping the moisture from her face. She failed to protect Loki before; she would not make the same mistake again.

'Bah!' Odin spat and resumed his fast pace. 'You knew from the start what his purpose was, why do you still insist that it isn't so?'

'To be your tool? Your puppet king on the throne of Jotunheim?' Frigga's voice rang harsh, disgusted by the very notion.

'That was his only use!' The All-Father lost his patience, slamming his palms onto the ornate doors leading to their chambers. The door wings flew open and hit the walls, startling them both for a moment. 'And he couldn't even do that,' the monarch sighed, suddenly exhausted.

'So now you want to discard him like— like a broken weapon? Is he nothing more to you?' Frigga closed the doors behind her and advanced towards her husband. She was furious—eyes ablaze and hair in disarray—she looked like a goddess of war.

'He failed to fulfill his duty! He's unpredictable; he defies me at every turn and is unrepentant, he must be punished for his actions against the Nine Realms!' Odin started pacing, gesticulating wildly with his hands. His anger began to rekindle again, fueled by his wife's accusing gaze.

'You care little for what he did on Midgard or Jotunheim,' Frigga said. 'You are enraged that he doesn't follow your orders without questioning them, like a good obedient warrior you wanted him to be. He has a mind of his own, a mind so brilliant that you are afraid of it. You never truly cared for him, did you, always grooming Thor for the throne, to be a perfect warrior, a perfect reflection of you—there was no time to take notice of your *other* son! But thanks to Loki even *that* didn't work out, and now you have no heir to take up your duties!' Something in Odin's face shifted, the hard truth suddenly too much to bare.



'One exiled and one imprisoned,' Frigga continued with heat. 'How are your subjects supposed to look up to you and love you, when even your own children can't?'

Odin balked at the accusation, but it was a truth he couldn't deny.

'Stop and think,' Frigga came closer and planted a warm hand on her husband's biceps as her tone softened. 'Maybe it is not too late to mend what has been broken.'

Odin just looked at her, his gaze full of doubt. He used to always listen to her wise words, when had that changed? He took her hand and kissed its knuckles. Maybe it was time he began to listen again...

~

*'The message has been received,'* Jarvis confirmed in his smart British accent. Natasha nodded checking for the third time that all of her equipment was accounted for.

After many hours, the team had finally managed to devise a plan that—according to Jarvis—had a fairly high chance of success.

The A.I. wormed its way inside S.H.I.E.L.D.'s database, combing through its files to find an employee delegated to the secret facility that Natasha could pass for. Using S.H.I.E.L.D.-designed technology, the spy obtained a scan of the woman's face that she could transfer later onto the holographic mask that would change her features accordingly. She had to also take some time to observe the scientist's behavior—enough to be able to pose as her without being instantly called out on the lie. When she felt prepared, Jarvis sent a fake message from S.H.I.E.L.D.'s HR department, ordering the scientist to take the day off.

Every hour wasted on the preparations hurt, but they'd only get one shot at rescuing Tony from S.H.I.E.L.D.

In the meantime, while Natasha, Clint and Bruce prepared the red-headed spy to pose as a scientist, Rhodey and Steve coached Pepper on how to use the Rescue suit. At first, Steve was astounded how determined the CEO was and how quickly she seemed to learn how to control the armor. She of course lacked the experience Tony and the Colonel possessed from years of using their respective armors, but with Jarvis's help—after just two days of extensive training—Pepper could fly the suit with ease, performing somersaults and barrel rolls in the air almost like she had been born to fly it.

Then there was Thor; unable to travel or even contact Asgard, the thunderer became restless. While the other Avengers busied themselves preparing for Tony's rescue, Thor took upon himself to patrol the city, flying over the New York skyline for hours on end, just on the odd chance that some villain decided to pay the city a visit that day.

'Ready?' Steve asked Natasha as he rounded the table where all her equipment lay. They exchanged a determined glance, both ready to do whatever it took to bring Tony home.

'Yes,' she nodded once, packing her things in quick movements.

'Let's go over the plan once more. First, you infiltrate the facility posing as Hannah Sales, reach the labs and—with Jarvis's help—download whatever data on Tony that you can find,' the soldier gestured towards a thin white box placed next to Widow's Stings. The device has been made by Rhodey and Jarvis themselves; since the inner network wasn't connected to the internet, the A.I.

couldn't access any of the data without being physically a part of it. The small external drive was equipped with transmitters that would allow Jarvis to connect with it through satellite feed and transfer data directly to Tony's private servers.

'Hawkeye, you will infiltrate the surveillance room and help Jarvis take control over it,' Clint nodded, the second external drive safely hidden in his utility belt.

'Bruce,' Steve looked at the doctor standing under one of the far walls. Banner was constantly on edge lately and struggled with the Hulk more than usual. They established that he would stay in the tower and wait for their return with medical equipment at the ready. 'We will be updating you on our progress. And as soon as the data streams in, you and Jarvis will try to make sense of it.'

'War Machine, Rescue, and I will stay in the quinjet and wait for Natasha's signal. Thor will take care of the weather. Understood?'

The group confirmed the orders and filed out, until only Steve and Bruce remained. As he passed by, Steve patted Banner's shoulder reassuringly.

'Hang in there, doctor. We need you to stay strong.'

~

Thor departed first, hammer swinging as he called on storm clouds to form; he would drag the cold air all the way through the Appalachians, forcing the cooler air to clash with the warmer transatlantic current from the south, providing cover for the quinjet's flight.

The S.H.I.E.L.D. facility lay beneath one of the mountains, snugly hidden away from curious eyes. It took them over two hours to reach their destination. Shrouded in clouds from prying eyes, Thor deposited Clint half a mile away from the compound; the archer would have to travel the rest of the way on foot. Vapor arose from the warm earth, concealing his approach even further. Previously when, together with Widow, he'd infiltrated the facility, they had snuck inside during a guard change, but this time Clint had to find an alternate route in. Having roamed through most of the ventilation systems in various S.H.I.E.L.D. bases, Barton was confident that he would find a way.

While Hawkeye hiked through the forest, Natasha relied on more conventional transportation; she parked the scientist's stolen car in an underground garage and headed to the elevator.

The first time the spy managed to sneak in, she had to use every trick from her arsenal and it still was a close call. Now with the scientist's face masking her own, artificial fingerprints and a fake ID courtesy of Jarvis (the A.I. was downright frightening; when he set his algorithms on a goal, nothing could deter him), getting inside was much easier.

Navigating through the corridors under the ever-watchful eye of the cameras was another thing; until Clint managed to secure the surveillance room, Natasha had to be very careful to not draw unwanted attention upon herself. The base was large enough that she had plenty of time to wander around and wait for the confirmation from her partner that it was safe to proceed.

Natasha was just exiting one of the smaller labs, a handful of notes of some genetic experiment in hand, when she heard the voice.

'-I am aware, but what beside that?' Fury demanded. The redhead's heart skipped a beat and she almost faltered in her step—the Director wasn't supposed to be here!

'Regeneration abilities are off the chart, sir! It's fascinating to see that some of the more shallow wounds knit almost instantly,' a scientist accompanying Fury crowed, his hands flying around with

excitement. Natasha followed them at a slow pace, only fast enough to stay in hearing range; she didn't want to risk being exposed.

'He's unique, sir. The blood sample we extracted didn't work so well with other subjects, the enhancements were second-rate, but still superior compared to average human. If we manage to crack the formula, we could extend our lives three, no, even four times!'

Natasha frowned; they were conducting experiments on humans here, trying to replicate the super soldier formula again maybe? She heard the Director's subdued reply, but had to change routes after that because her comm device cracked in her ear, followed by Hawkeye's hushed voice.

'I'm in. Preparing to plug in the drive now. Alpha 1?' They had to forgo their normal code names in case someone stumbled upon the frequency they were using.

*En route*, Natasha tapped out against the earpiece, unable to answer normally in a corridor full of people.

'Roger that,' Clint replied and the comm went silent. Without further delay, the Widow searched for an empty office or lab where she could plug the other device in without being seen. For Jarvis to be able to access the network, both drives had to be connected since his code was too big and intricate to fit on only one of them.

'Oh fuck,' Barton suddenly breathed into the comm, 'Alpha 1 you're close, he's in one of the rooms ahead, but be advised, Fury's there too. Shit, go through the door on your right.' Natasha did as instructed and she found herself in a big lab full of medical equipment. The benches were lined with microscopes and Petrie glasses; telemetry monitors displayed vital signs, their incessant beeping mixing with the soft hum of computers. Before Natasha moved towards the work stations, she picked up one of the vials containing a blood sample and discretely pocketed it. There were other scientists in the room, but they were too engrossed in their own work to pay her any attention. The Widow moved to one of the computers and quickly started tapping on the keyboard. Files sprang to life on the monitor showcasing Tony's physical state, some stats running off the chart. She worked for a moment longer, bringing up random tables and readings, and when Clint confirmed that Fury left, she slowly dropped to her knees, the white lab coat fanning around her like a cape. Natasha reached around the central station searching blindly for an empty USB port, fingers gliding over multiple cables. While the Widow struggled to connect the drive, she could hear someone approaching and she redoubled her efforts.

'What are you doing?' A voice rang from behind her and the spy bit back a curse. Natasha stretched her hand out and the plug slid snugly into the port.

'I dropped my pen,' she stood up, holding a ball pen between two fingers for the soldier to see. He gave her a once-over, his eyes lingering predictably over her cleavage and the nameplate pinned there.

'Carry on,' the man gestured towards the keyboard with his gun and went away.

*I'm in*, the Widow tapped out, eyeing the retreating back of the soldier.

*'Thank you, I'll take it from here, you should relocate to a more secluded location for the time being,'* Jarvis said.

The first part of the plan was done, now they had to prepare for the extraction.

Natasha lingered in the lab for a moment longer, checking samples and various vials until she was

certain the guard wasn't looking in her direction. She was just rounding the corner, slowly walking away from the lab, when Bruce's distressed voice filled her comm.

'Oh my god—'

'What is it?' Steve asked just as the Widow passed by a huge glass panel, separating the corridor and a big, sterile room.

'There is a video log,' the doctor panted, struggling to control himself. They all could hear his labored breathing and a crash of something breaking.

'Bruce—, Bruce listen to me, try to stay calm, you need to control—.'

'You think I don't know!' Banner roared and a sound of more glass breaking followed.

Natasha stopped in front of the window and stared at the body on the other side. Tony lay, strapped to a steel gurney, eyes opened wide and chest heaving. There was a breathing tube shoved down his throat and multiple IV's dangling from the other side of the bed. The arc reactor was nowhere in sight.

'Bruce,' Pepper's quiet, determined voice rang through the comm. 'Tony needs you,' she reasoned. 'You have to tell us if it is safe to transport him. We need to know, now.'

'No, I— I can't.'

'Yes, you can,' Pepper's voice soothed. 'For Tony.'

'Yes, yes...' the doctor panted, struggling to regain control. 'Give me a moment.'

Natasha looked around discretely. There were two armed guards outside Tony's room and two more patrolling the corridors. She straightened up and with confidence addressed the men at the entrance.

'I need a blood sample.'

'They just took some,' one of the soldier's gestured with his head towards the lab the spy just left.

'And we just injected him with a new solution. Do you want to explain to Fury why its effects weren't instantly documented?'

The men exchanged a glance and let her through. She pressed her magnetic card to the panel and waited with bated breath for the red light to change. When it did, Natasha quietly breathed a sigh of relief; one could always count on Jarvis. The redhead slowly went to Tony and checked the contents of the drips. One contained ketamine and the spy unplugged it quickly. She briefly touched his forearm and Stark jerked away.

'Tony, it's Natasha,' she whispered deactivating the holographic mask for a moment for him to see her face and the engineer's hazy eyes roamed over it, wide and unfocused. 'We are going to get you out, Hawkeye is on his way here and we'll bust your ass out of this shithole.'

Tony tried to speak, but he choked on the tube and only managed to garble.

'Are you done yet?' One of the soldier's asked from the door.

'Almost,' Natasha replied and turned back to Tony.

'One patrol down,' Clint whispered through the comm. 'ETA: 75 seconds.'

'Okay,' Bruce breathed in, 'according to this data, Tony's been injected with some kind of regeneration serum, his vitals are amazing, better than Steve's to be fair. I just barely scratched the surface of this, but Jarvis confirmed that it is safe enough to extract him.'

'I'm not sure he'll be able to walk,' Natasha worried, feigning drawing blood as one of the soldier's moved towards her.

'Then we'll drag his sorry ass out, second patrol down, ETA: 15 seconds.' Hawkeye reported.

'Hang on,' the Widow whispered to Tony and straightened up bracing for a fight.

'Hey!' The soldier grabbed Natasha's arm and when he noticed that the blood vial she held was empty he inhaled sharply to start shouting, but before he could squeeze a word out the Widow jammed a small throwing knife into his throat. The guard thrashed in her grip, alerting the other, but when the redhead looked up Hawkeye was already wrenching his own knife out from the man's spleen.

Natasha carefully removed Stark's breathing tube, while Barton worked on the restraints.

'Jarvis do you know where the arc reactor is?'

*'I haven't located it yet, I'm sorry.'*

'No,' Tony shook his head. 'Don't need—, no shrapnel—' he wheezed trying to sit up, his grip on Natasha's hand felt like a vice despite his weakened state.

'You sure?' The spy wanted to know. The news was unexpected, but it explained the empty hole in Tony's chest where the arc reactor used to sit. Natasha wondered briefly if the shrapnel was removed so S.H.I.E.L.D. could then take out the reactor and study it without endangering Stark's life.

Tony nodded so the spies helped him off the gurney, but he was too disoriented to stay upright.

'Dude, I will not piggyback you, that would be awkward, come on!' Hooking his hand around Tony's waist Barton hoisted him up and they slowly started to move; on their way out Natasha picked up the dead soldiers' guns. An alarm suddenly blazed over their heads and they cursed in unison as one of the scientists from the lab opposite them started shouting in the corridor.

'Jarvis, we need a distraction!' Natasha ordered hefting the semi-automatic.

*'Of course,'* the A.I.'s voice sounded a little too eager and before they knew it a series of explosions shook the compound.

'What did you do?' Steve asked, alarmed.

*'A few experiments were unfortunately exposed to a high temperature,'* Jarvis' reply was smug.

'How far are you?' The Captain addressed the spies, unwilling to argue with the A.I. for now.

'Not far enough,' Clint groaned, 'Stark's like a freaking sack of potatoes. Aw hell!' The archer swung to the right, dragging Tony behind him as an armed patrol ran out from one of the side corridors, guns aimed at the three. Natasha dodged the first salvo and responded in kind, her aim true.



*'I've began the fire prevention procedure, the firewalls will descend in 30 seconds,'* Jarvis announced.

'What about us?' Clint shouted over the whistle of bullets, shielding his head from exploding concrete.

*'I have calculated the safest route through the facility, regrettably it is still swarmed in hostile forces.'*

'Typical,' Hawkeye grumbled lifting Tony up again. The inventor clung to his vest as if it was his life-line. He looked like death warmed over, dressed in light sweat pants, without shirt or shoes. His hair was sweat-soaked and plastered to his temples, beard overgrown and tangled. But his eyes began to clear and he looked more alert.

Another explosion shook the base, this one much closer, as the two spies dragged Tony over S.H.I.E.L.D. soldiers' bodies towards the exit.

'So much for subtlety,' Barton sighed a moment later, shooting at another patrol. 'We're gonna be branded fucking traitors.'

*'I have also taken care of blocking all communication,'* Jarvis mentioned, *'except the personnel here, no one knows that the facility has been compromised. Alpha team, you are nearing the exit, Beta team, please get ready.'*

'Do you have my armor?' Tony rasped suddenly, gripping Clint's arm painfully; he could almost walk straight again.

'Why? You won't be fighting today,' Natasha looked curiously at the inventor, there was a dangerous glint in his eye.

'I need to talk to Jarvis,' Stark stumbled over a pile of concrete; he was leaving bloody footprints from where he stepped into a puddle of some fallen soldier's blood.

'I can give you my earpiece,' the Widow offered studying Tony's expression; he was plotting something, but she wasn't quite sure what. Stark shook his head as he disengaged from Hawkeye.

'It has to be the helmet.'

'War machine is with Cap and... Rescue.'

'You've brought Pepper here?!' Tony jumped towards her, rage twisting his features. Natasha stood her ground, unfazed by the outburst, but she cataloged it to study later.

'It was her decision.'

*'My protocols are being overridden, the firewalls won't stay closed for much longer,'* Jarvis chirped, prompting the group to move forward.

'We'll talk about it later, now move!'

The alarm was still blaring when they passed the last security gate and spotted Thor waiting for them at the entrance; over a dozen soldiers lay on the ground at his feet, unconscious or dead.

'It's good to see you friend!' The Thunderer shouted with glee, but when he clasped his big hand on

Tony's shoulder his eyes were searching and worried.

'Yeah, hey Fabio,' Stark dismissed him as his gaze landed on the quinjet and the two armored people approaching, Captain America between them.

'Give me the helmet,' Tony demanded of Rhodey without any preamble.

'It's good to see you too,' the Colonel replied, without making any move to remove the headpiece. He didn't like the tone his friend adopted.

'Jarvis,' the inventor ordered and the armor hissed, depressurizing. Tony took the helmet, ignoring Rhodey's muffled 'Hey!' and stuck his head into it.

*'It's good to see you again, sir,'* Jarvis greeted.

'Thanks, J. Did you manage to locate the arc reactor?' Stark asked reading the data displayed before his eyes. War Machine's HUD looked a little different than his own, but he quickly scanned the information provided and smiled when he noticed something else.

'Excellent. Take Rescue and go get it. And stall the motherfucker.'

*'With pleasure, sir.'*

Tony gave Rhodey back his helmet and just as the Colonel secured it over his head, both his and Pepper's armor opened, ejecting the humans out.

'Let's go,' the billionaire waved a hand towards the quinjet and started walking, once again ignoring his friends' protests; the two armors rocketed back into the facility.

'What are you doing?' Steve's protective hand hovered over the small of Tony's back as he looked back towards the entrance where the two Jarvis-controlled suits disappeared. He hurried to help his friend, the rest of the gang trailing behind them, surprised by Tony's weird behavior.

'We can get the fuck away from here, Jarvis will get the arc reactor. I won't leave it in S.H.I.E.L.D.'s dirty hands. And we,' the engineer pointed his finger at the Captain, 'are going to have a serious talk about letting Pepper tag along.'

Steve looked stunned for a moment; in the meantime the rest of the Avengers boarded the jet and took a seat.

'It was my choice,' Pepper interjected, defending the Captain.

'Fuck no!' Stark rounded on her. 'You will not risk your life for me. The armor was made to protect you from situations like this, not for you to dive head first into the fight!' Tony slumped heavily into the seat. The adrenaline high was wearing off and he felt exhausted. His hands and feet ached, so did his chest and throat, he just wanted to go home to— He would not think about it now.

The quinjet lifted off the ground and Steve set the course for New York; somewhere in the background Natasha quietly updated Bruce on the situation. Tony's eyes felt heavy and he closed them for a minute; a vicious headache began to brew between his temples. He could feel the worried glances of his teammates drilling holes in his back, but for the moment he didn't care.

Suddenly Jarvis' voice sounded through the cockpit.

*'Sir, I retrieved the reactor.'*

'How's the situation?' Tony asked without opening his eyes as he braced for the shitstorm that was sure to follow his next command.

'Everything is as you ordered,' he could hardly hear Fury's muffled curses in the background, but it was enough to make him grin.

'Blow it.'

A cacophony of protests arose around him—Steve's of course were the loudest—but he tuned them out and reveled in the satisfaction the order brought. Someone's hands gripped his shoulders and shook, hard, but it was too late; a deafening roar tore the earth underneath them as the side of the mountain collapsed in on itself, burying the facility under tons of rock and dirt.

One arc reactor was a force to be reckoned with, but three? It was *pure chaos*.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 37

Tony really needed to get out of the quinjet and fast; his head hurt like hell and he craved a drink—preferably a good old scotch—to calm his nerves.

The shouting just wouldn't stop. It was either Steve, or Pepper, or both, screaming their lungs out at him, and Tony was slowly losing his patience. Surprisingly, neither Natasha or Clint had said a word; maybe they were already plotting his quiet, but painful death—who knew. He was just grateful that they hadn't join in the shouting match.

The quinjet was maybe an hour away from one of Stark's many secret hideouts—or rather, lavishly decorated houses, scattered all over the world. He started to build a network of private residences—owned by various shell companies to keep his ownership interest a secret in the property records—right after the Mandarin incident, mostly out of concern for Pepper's safety; if, or when, another of his impulsive decisions ended with exploding buildings, at least she would have a safe place to stay.

'Jarvis ETA?' Stark slurred, ignoring Steve's latest lecture.

The drugs S.H.I.E.L.D. pumped into him were just starting to fade and Tony felt like puking, but since there was almost nothing in his stomach it would be too pitiful to even try.

*'ETA: 87 minutes, sir.'*

'Remember the protocols.'

*'Yes, sir.'*

Tony patted the console with affection and closed his eyes; it was easier to concentrate on not puking when he didn't have to look out of the flight deck windows.

'Another surprise?' Steve asked, accusation heavy in his rough Brooklyn accent. 'Will Jarvis take aim at us this time?'

'Can you fucking shut up for a moment?' Tony growled, finally losing it.

Steve's disapproving frown deepened, and with his arms crossed over his chest, Mr. Spangles suddenly reminded Tony of Howard.

'No Tony, I can't. You just killed innocent people! We are supposed to protect lives, not destroy them!'

'Innocent,' Stark snorted and pushed himself up to sit straighter, casting a furious gaze towards the captain. 'Yeah. They were so *innocent* that they gleefully discussed cutting me into tiny ribbons and studying the pieces that remained. You know, put my brain into formaldehyde and then poke it with a stick. And you know *why* they didn't? Because Odin needed me alive!'

Tony deflated, his anger burning out. He just wanted a bit of peace and quiet, was it so much to ask? He wanted Dummy to attempt to make a protein shake for his creator then ending up doing a mess, as usual. He wanted Jarvis' soothing voice updating him about the weather conditions in Malibu. He wanted Loki admonishing him for staying too long in the workshop, frowning at the grease stains all over Tony's face and arms.

But instead he got Steve-fucking-goody-two-shoes-Rogers, pestering him and demanding answers he didn't have or want to give.

'But why? What does Asgard have to gain, from involving itself in our affairs?' Steve continued.

'Leverage,' Thor suddenly cut in appearing right next to the Captain. 'Stark is the means to keep Loki under control. My brother cares for him deeply.'

Thor's statement painfully twisted Stark's insides. The lack of information about Loki's fate, after he was dragged away in chains to Asgard, was excruciating, and the knowledge that Tony had no means to obtain it somehow was even worse.

'So it is true—' Thor's gaze landed on the inventor and the god grabbed him by the chin to study his face. It made Tony tense visibly, his pupils dilating in panic and breath instantly going shallow.

'Don't—!' Stark threw himself backwards batting Thor's hand away and almost falling from the chair in the process. The reaction was so unexpected that it left the thunderer staring with his hand hovering in air where Tony's face was just seconds ago.

'Don't touch me,' the billionaire panted righting himself in his seat. His face was white as a sheet.

'My apologies, friend,' Thor bowed his head slightly. 'It is as I feared, the serum you were given came from our praised golden apples. It would appear that my father has plans involving you.'

'Yeah, Fury told me as much, when I was coherent enough to understand at all what he was saying,' Tony sent the captain a nasty glare, but Steve only frowned in return, the muscles in his jaw jumping from strain as they always did when he was angry.

'Tony, I know what S.H.I.E.L.D. did to you was unacceptable, but it doesn't give you the right—'

'Oh for the love of—!' The inventor jumped from his seat and started prowling the small space available, but suddenly the world tilted dangerously and he had to grab the back of a near seat to not keel over.

'First of all: I had every right,' Tony spun around and pointed his finger at the soldier, but before Steve could open his mouth to reply, he continued. 'Secondly: Jarvis, status report on the S.H.I.E.L.D. base.'

*'According to the data I managed to gather right before the blast totaled the site, 83% of the personnel managed to evacuate following the fire alarm protocols; there were 19 casualties including all the guards Agents Romanoff and Barton neutralized during your extraction, sir, and 3 scientists who disregarded the alarm. The remaining personnel are presently sheltering in the base's underground bunkers, awaiting rescue. S.H.I.E.L.D. has already received notice of the incident and rescue forces have been deployed.'*

'And my package?' Tony asked.

*'On its way.'*



'But how?' Steve stared at Stark and somewhere in the background the engineer could hear Pepper and Rhodey moving closer. He smiled thinly.

*'Thanks to Agents Romanoff's and Barton's help, I managed to take control over the facilities systems like we planned, and when the need arose changed the intruder alarm into a fire alarm and directed all personnel away from Mister's Stark path,'* Jarvis explained.

'Thanks buddy, you're the best,' Tony patted the dashboard affectionately.

*'For you, sir... always.'*

'And what about Fury?' Natasha approached the men, her face void of any emotions, but her eyes were searching and concentrated entirely on Tony. 'We heard him in the background, Stark.'

'As much as I would like to see him dead and buried under a ton of concrete, I sadly need him alive,' Tony's mouth stretched into a devious smile. 'He owes me some answers, anyway.'

A loud ping sounded from the cockpit, and all the windows turned black as Jarvis announced, *'ETA in 60 minutes, sir.'*

'What was that?' Steve frowned, fingers grazing the glass of a blackened window.

'Safety protocols,' Tony grunted. "We're approaching my evil lair, and I want it to remain hidden.'

'You don't trust us?'

'Captain, at this point I trust no one.'

~

The rest of the flight passed in relative silence, and Tony had a moment of rest before the quinjet landed safely in the underground garage of his hideout.

When the cargo doors opened, the inventor was the first to rush out—nausea coming back with force. Additionally his skin felt warm to the touch, too warm, as though he was feverish again, just like the first few days after being injected with the golden substance. Just as he stepped onto solid ground, Tony's head swam, and had to reach out to support himself on the nearest wall before he would faceplant on the concrete floor. With the dull ache in his chest and S.H.I.E.L.D.'s drugs washing out of his system he felt like death warmed over.

Pepper's worried face appeared in his field of vision. Tony tried to smile at her, but it came out more like a grimace of pain than anything else. 'I'm fine,' he grunted.

'Yes, clearly,' the redhead quipped carefully resting a hand on his shoulder. Rhodey's head peaked out from behind her shoulder.

'You look like shit, man. You need a doctor.'

Together they waited, hovering over Tony, until the engineer at last righted himself, his face pale and drawn.

While Stark was trying to catch his breath, the rest of the Avengers littered out of the jet casting curious glances around. The underground garage could easily house three quinjets and there would still be room to spare. The place was all gray and bland, with only a few marks drawn on the floor indicating the landing pads. On a faraway wall two sets of elevators sat waiting, but other than that

the space was empty.

'Cozy,' Rhodey commented, worriedly looking at Pepper over the inventor's shoulder.

'Tony how can we help?'

'I'm just tired Pep, nothing a good night's sleep can't help,' Tony waved a hand at them. 'You should go back to New York.'

'We won't leave you here alone!' She protested. 'What if something happens to you? We won't even know where to search. You need a doctor. And we need to find out what S.H.I.E.L.D. did to you exactly, and if we can reverse it, just like you did for me with the extremis,' Pepper's voice rose an octave, and it hurt Tony's ears.

'I'm fine,' he assured her through clenched teeth, but she tuned it out continuing her tirade.

'We should all stay here and wait for you to get better; we should talk this through with Thor—'

'You know what, this is a great idea. Thor, buddy, can you come here for a second?'

The god's footsteps echoed loudly through the garage when he approached, red cape swirling around his ankles like crimson mist. It always fascinated Tony, how both he and Loki managed to fight with those on and not tangle themselves in the fabric.

'Yes, friend?'

'I nominate you to be my guardian for the night, the rest of you should go back to New York and act as if nothing happened. If anyone asks, I'm on vacation,' Stark blurted out. He could almost feel the energy draining from his body; he needed rest, or just coffee—gallons of coffee.

'Tony, be reasonable,' Rogers argued. He was tense—shoulder blades drawn, spine taunt like a bow string, a picture-perfect hero ready for action, just waiting for the order to jump. 'We need to discuss what exactly happened in the facility, what does this serum do. And whatever it is that you're planning to do about it?'

Tony sighed; he wasn't in the state of mind to think, let alone plan. He needed to lie down, preferably with a bottle of scotch at hand.

'Cap, trust me; I would like to know what they did to me as much as you do, but for that I need Bruce here and you in the Avengers tower. You can do nothing here to help me.' Tony made a shooing motion towards the jet. 'Go. I'll be alright, Thor's going to look after me. Right, Bolt?'

'Of course! You have my word, Captain!' The thunderer boomed, gracing both Tony and Steve with a warm smile, but there was a hint of worry behind it.

'I don't like this, Tony,' Pepper sighed, 'but I know you well enough to be able to tell when arguing with you is a lost cause. Just look after yourself, okay?' she gently grazed Stark's cheek with her fingertips.

Tony flashed her a grin. 'Yes, Miss Potts. And by the way, you look hot in this undersuit, we should make it a new fashion trend.'

The comment made Pepper laugh and for a moment everything seemed better and brighter, then she grew serious again and stepped away, towards the quinjet.

'I want reports about your health from Jarvis every hour,' Pepper demanded with her scary CEO voice.

'Every four,' the inventor bargained.

'Two and that's final. You heard that Jarvis?'

'Yes, *Miss Potts*,' the AI's muted voice confirmed from the inside of the quinjet.

'Don't do anything stupid,' it was Rhodey's turn to demand things of him, and Tony just rolled his eyes.

'Do you even know me?' The inventor quipped, his eyes shining with mischief.

'Point, just don't set yourself on fire again.'

'It was one time!' Stark protested, but the look the colonel sent him instantly made his mouth click shut.

The team started to back away, reluctantly leaving Tony and Thor behind, when suddenly Natasha's pretty, yet viciously observant eyes appeared mere inches away from the inventor's face, startling him.

'What did you do with Fury?' She demanded.

'God, Romanoff!'

'Stark...'

The team's attention refocused on him and Stark cursed silently. He fought his exhaustion, forcing his limbs not to shake, because if the Avengers noticed how weak he really was, they would never leave him alone.

Tony made a step back, away from the petite assassin, but she followed and the space between them grew only marginally.

'You didn't kill him, you said it yourself, so where is he?' Natasha's inquisitive gaze bore into Tony and he didn't see an opening to bullshit his way out of the explanation.

'Yeah, okay, you got me, can I have my personal space back now, please?' He stalled, but when Natasha didn't move away Tony threw his hands up in capitulation.

'I have him in... custody. When Jarvis took War Machine and Rescue, and went to retrieve the arc reactor, I instructed him to grab Fury. As much as I would like to kill the son of a bitch, I need answers more than revenge. For now.'

'And after?' Romanoff asked.

Tony shrugged.

They stared at each other briefly, and after apparently finding what she searched for in his gaze, Natasha nodded once and finally backed away. She said something to Steve that Tony didn't quite catch and with a final goodbye the Avengers retreated into the quinjet. The engines roared to life, lifting dust particles from the ground and forcing Stark to shield his eyes from the gust of hot air that followed.

In the blink of an eye they were gone, leaving only himself and Thor in the empty garage.

~

As soon as the silence fell upon them again—the engine's rumble cut by the bay doors closing shut—Tony spun on his heel and headed straight for the elevator, but the movement was too sudden and a dizzy spell hit him, making the world swirl and narrow; a black veil darkened his peripheral vision and static noise filled his ears.

Stark grunted as his knees buckled and he fell to the ground, bile instantly rising to his throat. A disgusting wave of acid hit his tongue and the inventor couldn't suppress the urge to vomit any longer. His body convulsed and he barely managed to close his eyes to spare himself the gruesome view of the contents of his stomach hitting the pavement. While hacking his guts out, Tony shook with effort to not choke on the vile stuff, or pass out on the disgusting puddle.

Then Thor's strong hands gripped Stark's shoulders, entirely supporting his weight. The god was asking questions, but the static in Tony's head turned into a high pitched whistle, threatening to split his brain in half, and successfully drowned Thor's voice out.

Soon there was nothing left in Stark's belly, and when he began heaving dry, Thor lifted his limp form and carried the exhausted inventor to the elevator. Without a word from the thunderer the reinforced steel doors slid open, prompted by Jarvis' silent command, and the cab took them to the upper levels, where Stark's bedroom was.

'Thor,' Tony slurred weakly, 'what is happening to me?'

'Your body is still undergoing a change and that, combined with stress of the last few hours, proved to be too much for you to handle. It is not an uncommon reaction. Indeed you are lucky, my friend. Throughout the centuries I have witnessed only a few others being granted the gift of the Iðunn's apple, and they all took it far worse. You were probably given a weakened extract, therefore your symptoms aren't that severe, but since you were under S.H.I.E.L.D.'s medical care, the effects might have been delayed.'

'Lucky me,' Stark grouched, his voice hoarse due to the recent abuse to his throat.

Tony didn't notice when they reached his bedroom, but then he was suddenly deposited onto the toilet in the adjoined bathroom with Thor kneeling before him, their eyes almost at the same level. The god reached for the hem of the gray hoodie Tony found in the quinjet (probably Bruce's) and swiftly stripped him of it, revealing the engineer's chest with the empty reactor casing in the middle. The light caress at the edge of the metal rim startled Tony and his weary eyes snapped open.

'Whoa there!' The inventor exclaimed.

'This needs to be removed, it will hurt more, the further your body will change,' Thor's hand easily covered the entire hole in Tony's chest, and his fingers flexed over the too warm skin. 'Why is it empty?'

'The government always wanted to study the arc reactor and S.H.I.E.L.D. had a one-in

a-million chance to do just that. But they had to remove the shrapnel first. That's how they discovered that I'm now healing incredibly fast compared to a normal human being.' Tony rubbed at the scar tissue, beside the metal casing. 'We don't really have the tools at hand to remove it, nor the surgeon. Bruce is not going to take the risk,' Stark muttered pushing Thor's hand away.

'Nay, but we do, on Asgard. This is your plan, is it not? To go to Asgard?'

The inventor nodded; there was no need to lie to Thor, Tony would need his help anyway.

'I don't suppose you can just snap your fingers and the rainbow elevator will appear?'

Thor's eyes lowered in shame and he fidgeted with the hoodie still clutched in his hands.

'Heimdall doesn't answer my calling. Father must have forbade him.'

'Wonderful, the dad of the year strikes again. I was stupidly hoping we could do things the easy way for once, but as usual, we'll have to do it the *Stark* way.'

Tony tried to stand up, but Thor's heavy hand on his shoulder kept him in place. It was quite awkward—he, half naked and reeking of vomit, sprawled on the toilet seat, and Thor kneeling in front of him, cape fanned out like a red sea behind him on Tony's expensive tiles... it was ridiculous.

'And what way is that exactly?' The thunderer asked looking at Tony with suspicion.

'We're going to build our own rainbow bridge, of course!'

~ ~ ~



## Chapter 38

Another resounding explosion shook the golden palace of Asgard.

When it happened for the first time, the guards and all of Odin's renowned warriors scrambled, shouting to find out who dared to attack the heart of the Realm Eternal. As it was later discovered, the assault came from inside the house of Odin. Deep within its bowels a cavernous chamber lay, one to which only the monarch himself had the access to. In the middle of the brightly lit, cylindrical room, a prison cell made of light and energy had been formed—a force field to prevent one dangerous, angry individual from *ever* getting out.

'LOKI!' Odin boomed, trying to shout over the crackling energy raging behind the translucent walls of the wards he himself put in place. There, in the middle of the emerald mayhem and standing in the eye of the storm, was Loki. He stood perfectly still, with his eyes closed and hands lifted overhead, black locks whipped around his face and neck like a dark halo.

He entirely ignored his visitor, as he was wont to do every time the All-Father dropped by.

At first, heeding his Queen's advice, Odin tried talking to Loki, but it always ended in both of them screaming and blaming each other. So they simply stopped trying to understand the other's reasoning, which, really, was nothing new for them, and continued exchanging only hateful glares through the shimmering barrier.

Just like now, with Loki taking a quick look in his once-father's direction, his mouth twisted into a snarl. His voice rose, chanting the incantation louder and louder, spurring on the destruction within the boundaries of his prison. Whips of green light slashed the shining, golden force field, causing sparks to rain down onto the crystal floor, and forcing its rune-carved surface to illuminate with discarded particles of *Seiðr*.

The All-Father observed the spectacle with both fascination and trepidation. Since Loki's imprisonment, the trickster hasn't stopped in his attempts to break out of the cell. Forgoing sleep, he tried and tried again to weaken the barrier; as of yet to no avail.

Odin wasn't a fool; he knew that one day his not-son would find a way to escape; somehow he always managed to, no matter the obstacles he was faced with. This is why Loki's current accommodation was created with the help of dark energy—a force so unpredictable and volatile, that only few dared to dabble in it. Using those forbidden arts made Odin confident it would take Loki a long time to devise the means to escape.

Massive amounts of *Seiðr* concentrated high under the arched ceiling, swirling in sickening patterns, intertwining and splitting, pulsing with energy in tandem with the trickster's heart. Odin braced for the explosion moments before Loki spread his hands wide, ancient words spilling from his mouth, calling on the power he summoned to heed his command. A deafening boom split the space when the god finally released his spell, and a massive explosion followed short after, illuminating the chamber and momentarily blinding Odin. The ground shook and groaned, but the

force remained contained inside the force field.

When the dust settled and the rouge tendrils of magic slid down the barrier and were devoured by it, the All-Father took a tentative step forward, craning his neck to look for Loki. He found the trickster's body curled under the barrier—hair twisted in tangles, splayed in every direction, covering most of his dirt stricken face. He still breathed—Odin observed with a mixture of relief and annoyance, but his skin was covered in small cuts and bruises. The All-Father lingered a moment longer, taking in all the damage and contemplating the events. The wards held strong; with every new attempt at escape, Loki unknowingly only strengthen them more. Soon, Odin would not have to fear him anymore; the barrier would become impregnable.

With a last glance at the dust covered body, the All-Father left the prison.

~

Tony Stark had a problem; a big, muscular problem in a form of the god of thunder.

With hands crossed over his massive chest Thor stood unmoving in front of Tony's substitute lab, a thunderous expression on his face.

'I forbid it,' he boomed in his princely voice glowering at the inventor.

'But I've just got an idea, and Jarvis said that I have to input the data by hand. Since it's not my main lab, I don't have as many sensors and touch surfaces installed here,' Stark whined trying and failing to bypass the mountain of muscle.

'You lie, Tony. I know for a fact that Jarvis can do it by himself, you just want to go through the S.H.I.E.L.D. files again.'

'Because you wouldn't let me finish!'

Thor took a threatening step forward, thrusting an accusing finger in Tony's direction.

'You are supposed to be resting. What good are you when you can barely stand without help.'

'I don't have to stand,' the engineer protested, 'I have a very comfortable chair in the workshop and I just want to read the data. It's like resting, but better!'

In truth, Tony was practically swaying on his feet, and his head pounded viciously, but he just couldn't force himself to fall asleep. He tried earlier, but not even an hour went by as he ended on the floor—tangled in sheets and screaming. It took Thor a considerable amount of time to calm him down. Afterwards Tony practically inhaled two freshly brewed cups of coffee brewed with Red Bull, one after another, and there was just no way he was going to fall asleep after *that amount of caffeine*.

But Thor stubbornly refused to let him work.

'I just— Thor, I need to do this,' Stark sighed, threading a shaking hand through his unruly hair. 'There is a lot of data to go through, and I need to be doing something or I'll go nuts.'

'You are bringing Bruce and Jane here, are you not? Why not take the time to rest, so you can start working with fresh energy when they arrive?' The thunderer gently put a hand on Tony's shoulder and steered him towards the elevator.

'We don't have time for that!' The inventor exclaimed angry. 'We need to go to Asgard as soon as

possible!

'I don't think Loki would want you to put your health at risk because of him.'

The elevator chimed and opened, but Tony angrily weaseled his way out from under Thor's grip and beelined back towards the lab.

'How would you know?' He growled. 'You two weren't exactly a shiny example of brotherly love and friendship!'

With a roar the thunderer slammed Stark into the nearest wall, one massive hand flexing dangerously around Tony's throat. Stark's head snapped up to snarl back at the god, but the words instantly died on his tongue when he saw not rage in Thor's eyes, but hurt and sadness.

'Listen well, Tony Stark. It is true, that me and my brother rarely agreed on matters, but do not presume even for a moment that I do not care for his wellbeing. I have known him far longer than you, so believe me when I tell you that he would be most furious seeing you like this.'

'If we don't come up with a good rescue plan, he won't have an opportunity to even get mad at me!' Tony said, struggling to free himself from Thor's iron grip. It was unfair that the god was so much taller than him, because Tony's feet could now barely touch the floor. 'I need to learn everything I can about the Bifrost, and S.H.I.E.L.D. has a whole fricking databank dedicated to it!'

'You don't have to do this alone,' Thor finally let him go and Tony dropped to the floor like a sack of potatoes, gasping for breath.

'I need a head start, I need to know everything there is to know about it. I need— I need to work,' Stark began to babble as his eyes darted frantically between Thor's face and the lab behind him. He looked sick and on the verge of collapsing, complexion pallid and clammy.

The thunderer sighed, crouching in front of him and with a warm, gentle palm, that just moments ago was crushing his windpipe, guided the inventor's face up to look him in the eyes. This time Tony didn't flinch back—too far gone, to even notice the palm cradling his jaw.

'Tell me about Loki, Stark.'

'W-what?' Tony stuttered and his big, brown eyes stared at Thor with confusion.

'Is he intelligent? Cunning?' The billionaire nodded, not sure where Thor was going with the questions. 'Is he strong?'

'He is, but—'

'Then trust him to take care of himself! He will not sit with his arms crossed and wait for you to come and rescue him. It is not in his nature to be idle, he will fight for you as strongly as you are fighting for him.'

'I don't want to see him broken again,' Tony sniffed.

'Neither do I, my friend, but we need to trust him and keep our calm,' Thor explained and helped Tony stand. Together they headed for the elevator.

~

'Oh thank god, you're finally here!' Stark exclaimed, hopping down from the bar top where Bruce

was trying to examine him, and rushed towards Jane. For a moment she looked like a spooked deer standing in the headlights of a quickly approaching truck, but the spell broke when Tony extended a hand towards her.

'Doctor Foster,' he smiled warmly, 'your work on Einstein-Rosen bridges is engrossing.'

'Thanks,' Jane stuttered, her gaze briefly straying to Thor who stood further back behind the engineer.

'Hey! Introduce me too!' A petite woman jumped from behind Jane, briefly startling Tony.

'Darcy!' Jane hissed, trying to calm her assistant down.

'Come on, Jane! It's Tony Stark!'

The scientist let out an exasperated sigh and blushed prettily.

'Mister Stark, this is my assistant, Darcy Lewis,' Jane gestured towards her friend at the same time as Darcy waved hello.

'I'm here to make sure that she is watered and fed appropriately, because you scientist lot always forget about the basics,' she chirped happily shaking Tony's hand.

The statement made Bruce chuckle as he approached the group to introduce himself to the newly arrived.

'Doctor Foster, Miss Lewis,' he greeted.

'Doctor Banner,' Jane smiled.

'Doctor, doctor. Are you a doctor too, Mister Stark? Because I feel like I'm in *Spies Like Us* already!' Darcy exclaimed making Tony burst out into laughter.

'I might have a few doctorates, and please, call me Tony.'

He gestured for them to follow as he went to the kitchen to start brewing a fresh pot of coffee. 'Hungry?, Thirsty? I hope you managed to sleep during the flight. I admit, I would like to start working immediately, if it's possible. We're short on time.'

'I'm sorry, Miste-Tony. I don't really know what we're doing here, Thor was very vague over the phone.'

Jane was half a step behind the billionaire looking curiously around. The rooms and kitchen looked as if they were taken out straight from a catalogue. They felt cold and unlived in, all sharp angles and pristine white surfaces. There were no personal effects or framed photos on the shelves, just a few torn open packets of gauze and an empty syringe on the bar top where Tony had been sitting when they came in.

'Yes,' Bruce nodded, 'you said you would explain everything.'

The inventor spun around towards them to answer, but lost his balance and had to grab the counter top. Bruce instantly rushed to his side, but Tony waved him away.

'I'm alright,' he smiled thinly.

'You should let me take a closer look at you, Tony,' the doctor hovered over his friend, hand

outstretched over his shoulder, but not touching it. The worry was written plainly on his face and Tony felt bad for being the cause of it, but he had no time for this right now, he had a bridge to build.

'Later, pinky swear. Now to answer your question, Doctor Foster, you'll have to answer mine first: how much do you know about Loki's stay here on Earth?'

'Thor's crazy bro?' Darcy asked approaching the coffee maker.

Tony was about to bark something unpleasant, but Jane bit him to it.

'Hush!' She shushed, then turned back towards the inventor. 'I know that Thor brought him to you and that he was badly injured,' she exchanged a quick look with the god, 'I know that you were trying to help him and that you had a falling out with the other Avengers. That's it,' she shrugged. Darcy passed her a cup of coffee.

'Yeah, we moved to my house in Malibu and managed to restore his eyesight.'

'I still don't—' Jane looked around as if searching for the younger god, but when she didn't find him, her gaze returned to Stark.

'Then Odin's minions came,' Tony growled. 'They chained and muzzled him and dragged him away! Now I need your help to follow him to Asgard.'

Stark stared intently at Jane waiting for her reply. She could see the anger and desperation in his eyes. The sunken cheeks and pale complexion were an easy clue too; Tony was fixated at the idea of building a functioning wormhole, but Jane knew that with their current tech it was simply not possible. Maybe in a few years...

'I'm sorry,' she said slowly, keenly observing the inventor's face, waiting for the anger to boil over at her refusal. 'I've spent the last six years trying to build an Einstein-Rosen bridge, but it just refuses to work. I did the calculations multiple times and it just doesn't add up. In theory everything should work perfectly, but it just doesn't and I'm unable to find the cause. I'm sorry,' she whispered the last words, gaze drifting away, to not watch the spark of hope in Tony's eyes die down and disappear.

'I know,' Stark nodded, undeterred by her words, 'and I know it's not your fault, you did everything you could and you were brilliant.'

Jane looked up at Stark confused by his words.

'I will show you something,' with a fresh cup of coffee, Tony motioned for them to follow him back into the living room. The inventor plopped down onto the couch, careful to not spill his beverage and invited them to do the same.

'While waiting for you and Bruce, Thor and I had a little chat with our mutual friend. Play it, J.'

The enormous flat tv flickered to live and a footage from a surveillance camera started playing on the screen. It was an overview of a cell-like room, with glass panel instead of steel bars.

'Very Hannibal-like, I know, I couldn't resist,' Tony admitted half smirking to himself.

Jane and Bruce were both focused on the person sitting in the only chair the small room had. His clothes were singed on the edges and dirty, but he appeared to be mostly unharmed, with only minor cuts and bruises.



'Is that—' Bruce gasped, taking off his glasses to wipe them at the edge of his shirt.

'Yup, it's Fury. Now watch.'

The group observed Tony walk into the frame, hands in pockets, and a faint smile playing at the corner of his lips. Behind him Thor slipped into the room too, but stayed at the door.

*'Enjoying the stay?' Stark asked cheerfully and without waiting for a reply continued. 'How the roles have reversed. The last time I saw you, you were the one standing outside the glass box.'*

Fury lifted his head and leveled Tony with a dark glare.

*'Aw, don't give me that look, we came here to entertain you!'*

When the spy still refused to answer, Tony shrugged.

*'You know, I don't have to torture you or anything to get the information I want, I just have to wait for Jarvis to dig through all that shit you keep on your super-secret servers,' Stark paused for a moment, as if taking the time to think what to say next. 'The thing is, I don't really have time for that bullshit. I want to know how you managed to sic Asgard on Loki. And don't tell me it was a coincident, the timing was just too perfect. You had a strike team waiting for them to take Loki away before your team took me in, and then they sent that Asgardian chick over right away to inject me with that yellow shit. You had to have been planning this for some time.'*

Tony dragged a chair from under the wall and straddled it, resting his elbows on the frame. He stared at Fury for some time, then apparently got bored and took out his phone from the back pocket of his jeans. Flipping through data on the small screen Tony glanced from time to time at his guest, but Fury stayed unmoved. Thor was like a statue in the background—silent and unwavering. The footage sped up, prompted by Jarvis and the time stamp jumped up by almost an hour. The footage slowed down again.

*'You know what I have here? Files on every S.H.I.E.L.D. employee you ever had, including you. If you won't help me, I will dump it on the internet for all to see. Every covert operation you are currently leading will be blown, every spy exposed. You want that?'*

Fury's jaw tensed, but he still refused to talk. Stark crooked his head to the side, and flipped through some more data.

*'Maybe you don't believe me. Okay, let's see... Nicholas Joseph Fury, son of World War I pilot Jack Fury, yada yada, World War II hero, served in Holland, fought the Nazis, oh... that's interesting. Injected with the Infinity Formula to slow down the aging process. Ha! We can form a club together with Rogers, Romanoff and Barnes. Although I'm technically a demigod now...'* Stark chuckled mirthlessly, skimming through the information Jarvis was feeding him.

*'Want more? Any picks? Hill, Coulson?'*

'Okay Jarvis, skip to the good part,' Tony ordered from the couch watching himself taunt the superspy, and the footage sped up again, to stop suddenly when Fury rose from his chair.

*'That's treason, Stark!'* He growled breathing on the glass wall, he stood so close to it.

*'I don't care. Did you know that Pepper framed the first arc reactor? You know what was written on it? Proof that Tony Stark has a heart,' Tony chuckled, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. 'You took it out, Nick,' Stark gestured towards his chest where the blue glow used to shine through his shirt. 'Tony Stark doesn't have a heart anymore to give a fuck about you or yours.'*

The billionaire stood up and stretched groaning.

*'Nice chat, we should do it again. Now excuse me, I have a file to leak out.'*

*'Stop,'* Fury ordered with his most authoritarian voice when Tony was almost at the door. *'What do you want?'* he sighed.

*'Ah Nicki, it's good of you to finally ask. Who reached out first, you or Asgard?'* The inventor moved back to his chair, but remained standing with his arms crossed over his chest.

*'We did,'* Fury admitted reluctantly. He was visibly pissed.

*'How?'*

*'Thanks to Jane Foster.'*

*'What?'* The Tony on the screen asked sharply, and his question was a second later mirrored by Jane, who was sitting next to Bruce on one of the sofas. *'I didn't do anything,'* she protested.

*'Damn, I need popcorn, I have a feeling this is gonna be a good one,'* Darcy sighed eyeing the kitchen.

*'Oh yeah,'* Stark smiled observing his digitized self on the screen. He looked like shit, no wonder Thor wouldn't let him into the lab. Unkempt beard, hair in disarray, and the manic look in his eyes all screamed that he needed rest. But there would be time for that later. Now, he focused back on the screen.

*'She cracked it, Stark. She managed to design a working wormhole. Of course, the knowledge was too valuable to be left in hands of a mad scientist, who built her equipment from tin cans and paper clips. So we sabotaged her, took her data and replaced it with falsified information.'*

*'That son of a--'* Jane exclaimed abruptly jumping up to her feet. *'My life's work!'*

*'It took us months to fully understand what we had,'* Fury continued from the tv. *'Then we began to build it and it worked. Interplanetary travel Stark, you know what that means?'*

*'Trouble,'* the Tony on the screen grimaced.

*'We were no longer at the mercy of others, we could dictate the rules now.'*

*'Oh yes, because Odin is so eager to negotiate. What did you want to offer him? Colorful beads in exchange for gold?'*

*'A fugitive,'* Fury smirked, *'and leverage to make him behave.'*

*'You son of a bitch! You sold us out!'* Tony growled banging a fist on the glass wall separating him from Fury.

*'You made it awfully easy. With a bit of nudging you waltzed right into our trap,'* the superspy smiled lazily, sitting more comfortably in his chair.

*'By going to Malibu,'* Stark breathed out, recalling his fight with the Avengers over the bug he and Loki found in the workshop. *'The attack on my tower was also a part of that plan? You wanted me to find the bug?'*

Fury just shot him condensing a look that said: *you're supposed to be a genius, figure it out.*

'End it here, J,' Tony ordered.

'I can't believe it,' Jane began pacing, 'I did it, I actually did it. The Einstein-Rosen bridge worked! *It works!* Wait. Wait. Tony! I need to see the data S.H.I.E.L.D. has!' Her eyes sparkled with excitement and eagerness, and Tony smiled back at her, his spirit rising. 'I have to figure out what they changed in *my* data, why *my* calculations didn't work!'

*Wait up a bit longer, Snowflake. I'm coming,* he thought, joining Jane on their way to his workshop.

'I thought you'd never ask!'

~

Loki woke up with a pounding headache. Too exhausted to stand up, he rolled into a more comfortable position and sighed. And then, he noticed it—the tips of his fingers were tinted blue.

**Finally.**

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 39

He had a hard time breathing properly. Because you could only go that far with careful, shallow inhales. The pain was getting worse by the day, each breath an agony of molten fire licking at his sternum and ribs. Yet, he saw no other way but to endure; they were too close to give up now.

Tony rested his forehead against the cool surface of the bathroom mirror—his labored breath condensing on the surface while he fought to control the trembling of his limbs. Thor warned him that it would get worse, but he didn't think his condition would plunge so fast in such short time. He was supposed to be a demi-god now, or some shit like that, with heightened cell regeneration rate, super strength, more resistant body... And yet, he felt worse than ever before, worse even than after being outfitted with the first arc reactor, when his sternum wasn't yet reinforced with titanium plates to support the ample weight of the device.

The nerve endings in his chest—he believed were destroyed a long time ago—began regenerating, flaring to life every time his chest expanded even a little, while trying to take in air. He was almost afraid to breathe; if it were possible, he would use an IV to supply his body with oxygen.

And the worst part was that they were almost finished working on the Foster bridge. At this stage it just needed a few additional parts.

After many, many sleepless nights Jane finally managed to figure out what S.H.I.E.L.D. did with her data, how they corrupted her equations and research results, and she recreated everything, with Jarvis' watchful eye supervising the process and providing insight if needed.

Tony for the most part was useless. His health was degrading fast, but he hid it from the rest, not wanting to distract them from the goal. He smiled and joked when he had to, quipped at Jarvis and Bruce; but ultimately his input was minimal.

They were all exhausted and in need of a long rest, so his condition wasn't that hard to hide for the most part. Jarvis knew what was happening, because Jarvis knew him better than anyone, and besides, Tony couldn't lie to his sensors and body scans, they were the best in the world, he'd know, he designed them himself.

Thor probably also knew, or at least suspected that Tony was in pain, but he never said anything, he only watched the inventor with growing concern.

The stakes were just too high, for Tony to compromise everything they worked for. They had to get to Loki as soon as possible, before anything happened that Tony wouldn't be able to forgive himself for.

Sudden pounding on the bathroom door pulled Stark out of his reverie, and he shook himself

ordering his body to relax as much as it was possible. His hand unconsciously traveled to his sternum to rub at the scar tissue around the arc reactor, but he caught himself before his fingers touched the inflamed skin. The pounding repeated.

'Tony, open the door!' Bruce shouted from the other side, making the inventor grimace.

'What did you tell him?' Stark asked Jarvis.

*'That you needed medical attention, Sir.'*

'Couldn't you have phrased it less... life threatening?' Tony pouted, slowly making his way to unlock the door.

*'I believe, Sir, that I was accurate with my assessment, your condition falls into that category,'* the AI replied, disapproval strong in his perfect British accent.

'Tony!' Bruce was about to pound on the door again just as Stark opened it, the scientist's fist barely missing his face.

'I'm not dying Brucey, no need for you to call on the Green Cavalry and destroy my door,' Tony smiled at his friend, a little bland perhaps, but he tried his best, considering the circumstances.

'Jarvis said you needed my help,' Bruce huffed, scanning Stark's face for any signs of illness. 'What's going on?'

'Ah,' Tony scratched his neck, somewhat embarrassed to actually ask for help. He usually tried to solve his problems on his own, but he was just so damn tired. 'Wouldn't you perhaps have any strong painkillers in your magic doctor's bag? I kinda ran out.'

'How strong are we talking about, Tony? You don't look good, what's going on?'

Bruce extended an arm to touch Tony's cheek, but the engineer moved away, aiming for the living room. He didn't want to look the doctor in the face.

'I don't know, like morphine, but without the side effects? I need to be able to focus. Or just the strongest you've got, at this point I'm not picky.'

Tony landed gracelessly on the sofa, wanting to appear casual, but now that Bruce knew that something was ailing his friend, he would not be so easy to dismiss.

'Is it the serum? What symptoms do you have?' The doctor enquired, adjusting his glasses that somehow always managed to slip to the tip of his nose.

Tony waved a hand.

'Thor explained that my body is just changing, that's all. Nothing to worry about, doc.'

Bruce perched on the edge of the couch not far from Tony, his gaze boring holes in the inventor's skull. Tony smiled and wiggled his eyebrows at him, and Bruce couldn't suppress an eye roll.

'Fine,' he finally huffed, bending down to retrieve the bag. He rummaged through its contents for a moment, checking labels and muttering to himself. Tony quietly exhaled a sigh of relief.

'I only have ibuprofen with me,' Bruce rattled the yellow bottle, 'but I need to know what kind of pain are you experiencing.'



'Muscle pain, joint pain, headaches, that stuff,' Stark lied smoothly. He just needed to get the pills and be done with it. There was work waiting for him. Soon Rhodey would come with the components for the bridge assembly that Tony secured via Stark Industries, and the engineer wanted to be conscious enough and not in pain to work with his new toys.

*'That is not entirely true,' Jarvis interjected suddenly. 'Sir has been suffering from prolonged chest pain due to the inflammation around the arc reactor casing which was caused by the change in his —'*

'Mute!' Tony barked out, head snapping towards the ceiling—anger mixing with the pain in his chest into a volatile substance. 'No one asked you,' he hissed glancing at the nearest corner, where he knew the AI's sensors were located. 'You are not allowed to discuss my health condition with anyone, understood?'

Jarvis remained silent, forced by his creator's explicit order not to speak—the words *'Yes, Sir'* appearing on the interactive surface of the coffee table his only acknowledgement of the command.

Tony gritted his teeth, cursing the A.I.'s overprotectiveness. He refused to look at Bruce.

He heard the sound of leather creaking and then Bruce was kneeling in front of him, any signs of amusement gone from his face.

'Show me,' the doctor ordered, and upon noticing that Tony was about to argue, he continued. 'It is not a request.'

Even defeated, Stark didn't fail to throw a dirty look at his friend.

'Fine.'

With a weary sigh, the engineer struggled to take off his shirt. He grunted when the inflamed skin flared with pain when he yanked the piece of clothing over his head and threw it away.

The remains of the arc reactor were covered with an antiseptic dressing, that Bruce delicately disposed of, revealing the angry red skin underneath. The closest to the casing, Tony's flesh looked tender—swollen and warm—the skin stretched to accommodate the accumulating pus, that was also oozing slowly out. Around it red streaking began to show radiating outwards like scattered light rays.

'You are an utter moron, Tony! Why didn't you say something earlier? We need to get you to a hospital, and remove the casing!' Bruce shouted, throwing his hands in the air in a frustrated gesture. He was up, tugging on Stark's shoulder to help him stand, but the engineer refused to move.

'I can't, I will not risk it, not now.'

'What?' The doctor asked, confused. 'You are risking your life, Tony, this is serious.'

'S.H.I.E.L.D. is probably already looking for me. I refuse to believe that Hill didn't know about what Fury was doing in their secret facility, and since he's off the grid, the blame for his disappearance and the base exploding will fall onto me. If they'll capture me now, everything will be for nothing. Besides the Foster bridge is almost finished, we just need to finish calculations for the ignition sequence and build the damn thing.'

Tony rested his head on the back of the couch. He was exhausted, but the knowledge that he would soon see Loki again gave him strength. He really, *really* hoped he would see Loki again.

Upon Bruce's request slash order, Tony was supposed to be resting for the remainder of the afternoon, no running around the lab and stuff like that. He was grateful to the doc for the concern, even if it was interfering with his plans. Now, full of pain meds, Tony could think more clearly, not crippled with constant pain (well the pain was still there, and Tony had to be extra careful when moving, but it wasn't debilitating like it was before, and he could function almost normally, albeit a little slower) and that was good.

The bad part? Everyone knew that there was something wrong with him (shocking! There was always something wrong with, usually though he managed to hide it better...) and before an hour went by, Tony had to suffer through a very loud video conference with a very angry Pepper Potts. Tony made Jarvis bullshit his health reports to her, but he couldn't control Bruce—doctor's confidentiality apparently be damned.

He could understand that they were concerned (although it was still difficult for him to grasp the concept that someone was worried about him and not his money or corporation) and it felt refreshing in a sense, if not a bit too constraining—Tony mused, lounging on a couch and flipping through data on his StarkTab.

*'Sir, doctor Foster asks if you can spare a moment, we might have encountered a speed bump,'* Jarvis announced.

Tony couldn't stay mad at his AI for long, so he called off the muting order right after Bruce left.

*'Sure, I'm awake. She wants a video conference or should I go down to the lab?'* The inventor yawned, he was bored out of his mind, some brain storming would do him good.

*'Video conference will suffice, Sir. Your presence in the workshop isn't needed.'*

*'Ouch. You still mad, J?'*

*'I have witnessed you almost kill yourself by withholding vital information about your health once before, Sir. By revealing your condition to doctor Banner, I operated in your best interest,'* Jarvis replied. If he had a face to display emotions, Tony was sure he would see him pouting now.

*'I know buddy, but sometimes there are more important things to protect.'*

*'For me, Sir, you are the most important being worth protecting.'*

Tony smiled softly, as he adjusted himself to better see the TV screen. Jarvis' words sounded sappy as hell, but still managed to warm his heart.

*'Thanks, J,'* he whispered just as the TV screen flickered to life and Jane's frowning face appeared on its surface. *'What's up, doctor Foster? You look as if you just swallowed a lemon.'*

*'Tony! I made some calculations and I think that we might need something more heat resistant for the spark plugs than the palladium electrodes you provided. Jarvis confirms that upon ignition we might expect temperatures oscillating in range from 3200°F to over 4000°F! A palladium center wire won't withstand such heat, and if it fails we may damage the whole construction!'* Jane blurted out in one breath, waving her hands to emphasize her point.

On the screen of Tony's StarkTab a series of tables with various calculations and formulas sprang to life under the inventor's daft fingers. The doctor was right—he concluded quickly—skimming through the data, palladium wasn't resistant enough for their purpose. They would have to find

another component, and use it instead. And ASAP.

'Jarvis, what other options do we have?' Tony asked the AI.

*'Tungsten, with its melting temperature of 6192°F. But it is highly brittle and difficult to work with. It is also out of our range of availability, Sir, acquiring it would take too much time and consume a lot of resources. Then there is platinum, with melting temperature of 3214.9°F, that only barely fits our criteria of heat resistance, and osmium with melting temperature of 5491°F. It would be an acceptable component, however in 2012, the estimated US production of osmium was 75 kg, making it also unavailable for us on a short notice.'*

Tony deflated visibly; it could take them weeks of paperwork to obtain even the smallest amount of any of those metals. They didn't have that time, *he* didn't have that time. They had to go to Asgard as soon as possible, for Loki's sake and his. Tony wanted to curl into a fetal position and cry; it was too much—obstacle upon obstacle was piling over his head; he made two steps forward to then backtrack another ten. He was tired and in pain, and everything around him was just falling apart.

*'However,' Jarvis chimed in, disturbing Tony's spiral into depression, 'there is one other chemical element, that would fit our needs perfectly. It can withstand the ignition heat and with a bit of help it can be obtained in a matter of days.'*

'What the hell, Jarvis,' Tony exclaimed irritated, 'why didn't you start with that?'

*'Withholding information, Sir, until it's beneficial to me. I've learned it from you,'* Jarvis' modulated voice was dripping with smugness, Tony could almost imagine him grin like a madman.

'You son of a...'*'* the billionaire breathed out, he wasn't sure if he wanted to kiss his AI, or scold him again.

*'Genius, Sir?'*

This time Tony did laugh, his mood lifting somewhat. So not everything was lost, they still had a chance.

'So, what is it? Don't keep us hanging!' Darcy's voice sounded from the TV as she walked into the frame holding two plates with sandwiches.

Tony quickly recalled the periodic table; all the elements Jarvis mentioned were placed close to each other in the platinum group, so the one he didn't yet mention would be...

'Iridium, of fucking course it would be iridium. What would be better for interplanetary travel if not the component Loki sought for his portal,' Stark answered before Jarvis could.

After the battle of New York, Fury let Tony and Bruce play with the portal device for a while, but they couldn't make anything out of it, and Selvig was too out of sorts to help, so they got bored pretty quickly, and the machine was shipped to storage to some unknown S.H.I.E.L.D. treasure cave.

'Jarvis, dig through S.H.I.E.L.D.'s database and see if you can find it,' Tony ordered, excited.

*'I already did, Sir. It is stored in a heavily guarded warehouse on the outskirts of D.C.'*

'Can you get it?' Jane asked. She was as excited as Tony, if not more. Her dream, her life's work was almost completed. It just needed a little push.

'No, but I know who can,' Tony smiled.

~

'So tell me again, why all of you had to tag along?'

'Dude, this thing is huge, how the hell was I supposed to lift it alone?'

Clint jumped down from the cargo ramp, grinning from ear to ear—behind him stood the whole portal device. Natasha and Steve followed the archer down to the landing pad also waving their hello.

'You were only supposed to steal the cylinder containing the iridium, not the whole thing, stupid. Now S.H.I.E.L.D. cronies will notice that it went missing!'

Stark threw his hand into the air and hissed promptly after, when the muscles tugged at the bundle of inflamed nerves in the center of his chest.

'They won't notice, there is hardly anyone there and the place is clustered with all kinds of junk,' Clint dismissed his worries with a shrug. 'Why do you need that stuff anyway?'

'We were worried, Tony. Bruce said you're getting worse and won't listen to reason,' Steve interjected.

The sad puppy expression the captain gave him almost worked, but Tony was too distracted by the key component finally arriving, to pay the captain much attention. And since they also brought pain and anti-inflammatory meds, he could let them stay, for now.

'Fine, whatever. Rhodey is also here, you can go play together and let the parents work.'

'You remember our deal, right?'

'Yes, Clint,' Tony sighed. 'I don't go back on my word. You will get your lifetime supply of pizza, no worries, just when I get back from Asgard.'

'But I need it, Stark!' Barton flailed. 'You look like death warmed over already, what if you don't come back?!'

'Thanks for the words of encouragement, birdbrain,' Tony grumbled.

He took out a set of tools and carefully began unscrewing the front panel of the device. He was glad that they left the iridium inside after they got bored playing with the machine the last time. Who knows what would have happened to it otherwise.

It has been over two weeks since he was rescued from Fury's greedy claws. In that time Foster managed to accomplish wonders with the data S.H.I.E.L.D. corrupted, restoring it to its original state. While she was busy with her work, Tony and Bruce concentrated on the more material aspect of the project. Using Jane's old schematics, they designed, or rather—redesigned the outer shell of the machine. Even Thor had his input—he knew quite a lot about the Bifrost's design. Now the almost complete machinery stood proudly in the center of the hangar—clusters of cables and massive power cords slithering in every direction over the concrete floor like snakes.

Stark took out the cylinder grinning like a mad-man.

'At last!' He laughed, admiring the slick design of the tube and the rare metal inside.

'Now you're just freaking me out,' Clint whined, moving away from the mad inventor.

'You are building a portal!' Natasha pointed out suddenly and all heads turned towards Tony. Steve grimaced, a lecture already brewing inside that blond head of his about the dangers of such contraption.

'Technically it's not a portal. A portal is like a door, you open it, you step through and you already are at your destination. This is a wormhole, something like a tunnel through space and time, connecting two points. To reach your destination you have to travel within its boundaries for a period of time. So no, I'm not building a portal.'

Stark looked around and everybody was still staring at him.

'What,' he barked, 'you thought I would just sit here politely and twirl my thumbs? I need to get to Loki, and that's the only way!'

'But what if it doesn't work, what then?' The captain asked, eyeing the iridium tube in Tony's hand. He had witnessed too many times already what alien technology was capable of, and it was never anything good.

'Oh, it will. Fury tested it. And we have all his data to compare to ours.'

'He did what?' The captain exclaimed.

'Uh! I don't have time for this! Jarvis will explain everything to you, I need to finish this baby.'

Gently cradling the tube in the crook of his arm Tony left not even looking back at them.

*So close, so close he was to accomplishing his goal. Just a little more!*

~

'Okay, we only have two tries before the machine overheats—one for the test subject and the other for us.'

Stark stood at the edge of the Foster bridge platform, clad in the Iron-man suit, a banana clutched in his armored fingers.

'From the lack of living test subjects this will have to do, unless anyone volunteers?' Tony looked over his shoulder at his teammates stationed behind a thick, reinforced glass wall, in the bunker he erected just for the purpose of keeping them safe in case something went wrong. Their expressions were not amused. Stark shrugged—it wasn't the first time he had to work with unresponsive audience. Without further ado, he placed the fruit on its designated spot on the platform and joined the rest of the group.

'On my mark! Three... two... one... go!'

Jane quickly tapped several commands on the keyboard and a sound of the device charging filled the room. Tony watched the platform with rapt attention up until the moment the hangar exploded with a light too bright to see anything. When it died down, he jumped out of the secure room to see the results for himself. The banana was gone, and aside from a wisp of smoke coming from the used up fuses the device seemed to be okay.

'Jarvis status!' Tony ordered excited, lowering his faceplate to inspect the data himself.



*'It would appear, Sir, that the test was a success. Congratulations.'*

The inventor scanned through the data, comparing their energy charts with those S.H.I.E.L.D. recorded; it didn't look exactly the same, because the object's mass was different, but it was promising. Also nothing exploded, which was a pleasant surprise.

'Jane, what do you think?'

'I think,' the astrophysicist started carefully, 'that one test is not enough to determine if it's working or not, not to mention if it is safe, but you probably won't listen, will you?'

'Tony, this is madness! God knows what it will do to you in there. There has to be another way!'

Steve approached, reaching out to grab Stark's shoulder, to talk some sense into him. Truth to be told, he didn't believe the bridge would work at all; at best—he thought—it would smear the banana all over the hangar. But this? This wasn't good, *this* was a potential way to kill two of his teammates, and Steve wouldn't have that.

'You can't do this!'

'I can, and I will,' Tony spun around and slapped the captain's hand away. 'Thor, you coming buddy?'

'Aye Tony, let's go,' the thunderer nodded. Together they stepped onto the platform and looked at their friends.

'In case of me not coming back, Jarvis has protocols he will begin executing a month from today. Also, if you want to see Fury, he will show you the way.'

Smiling ruefully Tony looked at Rhodey.

'Take care of Pepper, she's going to be furious for not seeing us off, but she had more important things to attend to than this.'

Looking all over the place Tony waved at his friends, then nodded to Bruce and Jane.

'Punch it in, doctor!'

While Jane was counting down to the ignition, the Iron man's faceplate slid into place, and when the HUD loaded Tony whispered.

'Bye Jarvis, please protect them for me.'

*'Of course, Sir. Have a safe trip.'*

Before he could reply, the room went white once again, and all of a sudden the only thing he could feel was excruciating pain. He couldn't tell if it lasted only a second or a century, but the next time he managed to take in a lung full of air, he was being lifted from the floor by Thor and a massive guy in golden armor was shoving a big ass sword into his face.

'Umm... we come in peace? I think...'

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 40

Loki watched with fascination as his *Seiðr* trickled down the illusionary walls of the prison Odin constructed for him. Upon touching the force field, the green wisps sizzled and burst out with sparks, only to be consumed by the dark magic imbued into the walls. Odin surely thought himself clever for using dark energy for his construction—an impenetrable prison even Loki's magic couldn't break. No! He even unknowingly fueled it with his angry outbursts, strengthening the wards every time he tried to break free. The All-Father had assumed that Loki was throwing all his magic at the barrier to spite him, to inconvenience him at the most unreasonable hours, the outbursts of *Seiðr* so strong that they shook the palace in its foundations. And Loki let him believe that, let him assume that he didn't know how his magic was used against him, let himself be underestimated once again.

Odin was a fool for thinking that he could contain Loki.

There was no force under the branches of *Ygg'drasil* that could stop him from reaching his goal.

The force field shivered, absorbing the last few vestiges of his *Seiðr*, and Loki dropped down to his knees, exhausted and almost entirely blue—his jotun heritage exposed by the overuse of magic. He was pleased that he finally managed to gain some control over the blackouts that he used to suffer after each overexertion, it would do him no good to finally be rid of all his *Seiðr* just to end up unconscious on the floor. No, he needed to be coherent and able to move when the time came.

Loki grunted, sliding against the transparent wall of light, limbs too weary to obey him. He wondered how much time had passed since he was placed in this gilded cage.

His thoughts turned to Tony, as they often did, and the expression he wore when they saw each other last. Loki wanted nothing more than to return to him and erase the despair from his lover's face, to kiss the sadness away. But he had to be patient, he had to pace himself, gather as much energy as he could and transfer it onto the barrier. Odin saw it as a perfect prison; to Loki it was more like an accumulator—a container designed to hold the excess of his magic until he would have need of it.

Breathing heavy, Loki sat slumped in an awkward position against the barrier. The outbursts still left him too vulnerable, too exhausted to be able to act quickly. Ridding himself of all his reserves was much more complicated and time consuming than he previously assumed. Without Victor's assistance, he had to get rid of his magic on his own, and it was no simple feat.

The god snorted, Odin should have learned after the first time that Loki would do anything—even revert to his hateful true form—to escape from him, but the old fool was too confident in his power for his own good. He thought himself invincible, yet he was far from it.

Loki looked up towards the faraway ceiling. He was worried about Tony. The vision he glimpsed from Odin's high seat, before he was so brutally yanked away by his not-father, was echoing in his

dreams almost every time he let himself rest—Tony strapped to a steel gurney, the arc reactor gone from his chest... Loki wondered sometimes if it was all a ruse to break him, orchestrated by Odin himself. The All-Father would never admit it, but he feared Loki. Seeing him walking around the palace, with his *Seiðr* intact must have been grating, but he gave Frigga his word and couldn't break it. So maybe with Heimdall's help he made Loki break the terms of his punishment instead, which allowed him to then place the trickster in containment as he wanted. It *was* possible, and since Loki was beyond desperate for even the smallest glimpse of how Tony was faring after his departure, planting the idea in his head wasn't especially hard. He had to admit he fell for it embarrassingly easy, but in his defense, he was really concerned for his mortal genius.

The god banged his head against the force field, creating golden ripples that scattered in all directions. He wanted to see Tony again.

~

The broadsword didn't vanish from in front of Tony's faceplate as he had hoped it would. Instead, the giant of a god wearing enormous golden armor, leveled him with a stare that could have intimidated anyone, if they, of course, weren't Tony Stark; if he had to compare it to anything, Howard's furious glare was worse, *much worse*.

'Gatekeeper,' Thor greeted, slightly bowing his head in acknowledgement. That guy must have been someone important if even Thor showed him such respect.

The thunderer helped Tony haul himself up to his feet under the scrutinizing gaze of the giant, who, all the while, observed them with his eerie golden eyes. Did he not know that other colors existed too, Tony wondered briefly, trying to catch his breath—the journey through the wormhole left him breathless and in pain.

'You are not welcomed in this realm, Thor Odinson. By the decree of the All-Father, if you were to step a foot outside this dome, you are to be detained and imprisoned,' the man announced, his deep, booming voice echoing from the curved, golden walls. Really, was everything golden in this place?

'I am aware, Heimdall, but we came here with a mission, and we will not be deterred, even by you, my friend.'

Thor's expression was apologetic as he hefted Mjölfnir more comfortably in his big palm. Tony charged his repulsors, just in case he had to step in and help, but he knew that in his current condition he wouldn't be able to do much.

'So be it.' Heimdall's golden sword swished through the air as the god readied himself for the thunderer's charge, but before the two could clash their weapons, a strong, commanding voice rang inside the dome.

'Stay your weapon, Heimdall.'

A petite woman stood in the entryway, a faerie of colors from the rainbow bridge outside illuminating her form. She was dressed in a gorgeous robe, embodied with golden thread that created beautiful and complicated patterns all over the hem of her skirts.

Tony stared, hit by a weird sense of recognition—the stern look she was aiming at them was almost identical to the expression Loki made every time Tony behaved like a petulant child.

'My queen,' Heimdall bowed, withdrawing his weapon. 'I have been ordered by the All-Father to

refuse entry to your son.'

'I am aware, Gatekeeper, but I am your queen and I order you to let Thor and Anthony Stark pass, they are my guests and I will not see them harmed.'

'Mother,' Thor breathed out, his expression a mix between joy and longing.

'As you wish, my queen,' Heimdall finally relented, sheathing his sword. He stepped to the side letting Tony and Thor through.

'My husband is currently extremely busy and any distractions would be most unwelcomed. You can inform him of my guests' arrival in the morning.'

Frigga smiled warmly at Tony and he was instantly reminded of Maria; somehow, he liked the queen's smile better.

Thor peered at Heimdall like a kid looking up to his favorite uncle when he did something wrong and joined his mother. Tony tried to follow, but his head swam and if not for the safety protocols Jarvis had for the suit, he would have toppled over. It must have shown in the aborted move he made, because Thor was at his side in an instant, his big hands grabbing Tony's shoulders.

'I'm fine, it's fine, let's go,' Tony tried to smile to reassure his big blond companion, but he forgot that the thunderer wouldn't be able to see it through the faceplate.

'You are ill,' Thor's brow furrowed and he looked over his shoulder to his mother. 'He requires a healer,' the god announced for the whole Asgard to hear, making Tony grimace. He wasn't that weak, he could still go on if he needed to, he just had slight trouble catching his breathe.

Suddenly the queen was at their side, worry written plainly on her face. Tony ordered Jarvis to rise his faceplate, it felt rude to talk to her through it.

'It's not that bad,' he smiled at her and only when their eyes met Tony was hit by the realization that this was Loki's mom, that he was meeting his lover's mother and that her first impression of him would be that of a weak mortal who couldn't even walk straight after a short trip through a wormhole. A *very poor* first impression.

'Brace yourself, Anthony, this won't be pleasant for you,' she warned laying a hand on his shoulder right next to Thor's, and before Tony could ask what she meant, the world lurched under his feet, and he lost consciousness.

~

When he came to himself, and slowly opened his eyes, Tony noticed that he was still inside the suit. Propped against a wall, he was sitting hunched to the side like a puppet which strings were cut loose. When he tried to move, the pain in his chest flared to life, forcing out an involuntary groan from the inventor and alerting the people around. Thor appeared first, sliding to his knees in front of Tony's crumbled form, his face an open book of various expressions mingling together—from relief of seeing Tony awake, to grief of seeing him in pain. Then the queen approached with an entourage trailing behind her; she smiled at Tony as she dismissed her company—the people dispersing to take their places around the room. The lights around them were dim and orange in color, but even in his weakened state Tony took note of the weird looking tech and holographic displays hovering over a few consoles. The queen sat next to him on the bench.

'We are ready to begin the procedure,' she said, 'but we didn't know how to peel your armor off you, and we didn't want to damage it. Thor says it's your pride and joy.'

Tony's muddled mind had some trouble processing the speech, freezing on the word procedure. He looked around, but didn't notice any medical equipment he imagined should be at hand; there was only a low, long pedestal, illuminated from below with bright yellow light.

'It wouldn't be that easy to take off,' the engineer grunted, lifting himself up and off the bench. 'Jarvis, open up,' Tony ordered, and the localized version of his AI, that he created specifically for this trip, obeyed without question, retracting the plating first on the chest and abdomen, then arms and legs, to let his creator out. Tony stumbled from the armor, clad only in his black, skin tight undersuit, and was caught by Thor's strong arms, just in case he were too weak to stand on his own. It was embarrassing, how a little trip to another realm left him almost crippled, but given the state of his health before, it wasn't that surprising.

*Pathetic*, Tony thought grimly, when Thor's surprisingly gentle hands stirred him towards the glowing pedestal. How was he supposed to help Loki when he couldn't even help himself?

'Wait. Procedure?' The inventor slurred, sitting on the cold surface. Reluctantly he let himself be stripped from the undersuit—his too warm and inflamed skin exposed to the cool air of the room—and guided down onto the bright surface.

'We shall remove the foreign object from your chest,' the queen explained. 'I am sorry, but I cannot undo the damage that my husband has wrought; your body cannot return to the state it had been before you were forced to take the serum.'

'What? Just like that?' Tony asked alarmed. 'I will have a giant hole in my sternum!'

'Worry not, Anthony. Every component needed to successfully complete your surgery is accounted for and ready. We have been preparing for this moment for weeks, waiting for your arrival.'

'Wait, what? What are you talking about?' Tony wanted to sit up, startled by the queen's explanation. 'What do you mean "*weeks*",' he squawked, trying to bat away hands that wanted to pin him back down to the glowing pedestal. He didn't like what was happening around him, with all the magic mumbo-jumbo and vague explanations. He was already once harmed by Loki's supposed parent, how was this time any different? They never asked permission, only did what they wanted.

'No! Stop!' Tony trashed, but to no avail; he was just too weak in his current state to fend off his assailants. With a corner of an eye, he caught a glimpse of Thor, standing at the back of the room, with his arms crossed over his massive chest, doing absolutely nothing to help him. Panic bubbled inside Stark's chest; he didn't want to be touched by any of those people or experimented on. Suddenly the situation reminded him of Afghanistan, where during his torture men were bending over his trashing form, forcing his head down under the surface of ice-cold water. Tony opened his lips to scream—scared out of his wits—but his throat closed and refused to take in air, effectively choking any noise he wanted to make.

'Anthony, we don't have time for this,' Tony heard the queen sigh. 'We'll have barely enough time to finish. Calm down.'

'Please—' he managed to choke out through clenched throat, the panic attack now in full swing. He couldn't breathe—he felt as if his lungs were filled with ice and fire all at once; he could barely see—the tunnel vision narrowing with every second without oxygen. When the queen reached out a hand to touch his brow he tried to flinch away, but strong hands kept him in place.

'Sleep now,' Frigga whispered, delicately stroking his overheated skin, and Tony just couldn't fight the order. A stray tear rolled down his cheek and disappeared between the sweaty locks plastered



to his temple.

~

Thor observed as the healers made quick work of the metal casing in Tony's chest, skillfully extracting it and the metal supports attached to the man's ribs. Then came the worse part: fitting new bones and muscles in place of the destroyed or missing ones. The healers had to meticulously measure each fragment of synthetic tissue they placed inside the mortal; activate enchantments and spells in correct order for the parts to begin mending together; channel the energy from the healing cradle in just the right doses and monitor Tony's vitals all the time. It was a tiring and delicate work, only possible because of the golden apple elixir that was forced upon Tony; without it, the specially grown tissue would have been instantly rejected by the too weak, mortal body.

Stark's earlier outburst saddened Thor greatly. He knew the man was strong and brave, and Thor was honored to be his shield brother. Watching him distressed and pleading for mercy tugged at the thunderer's heart and left him feeling guilty; if not for his decision to bring Loki to Stark's tower that fateful afternoon, none of this would have been required—Tony would have been safe and pain free, enjoying his life with the other Avengers, and Loki... Loki would have to suffer a too cruel punishment until Ragnarok.

Thor was pulled out from his grim thoughts by Frigga's gentle hand on his biceps.

'You foresaw this?' He gestured with his head towards the group in the center of the room, fervently working to save Tony's life.

The queen's gaze followed and turned sad when she regarded the prone form splayed lifeless inside the cradle.

'This and more.'

'But you can't reveal anything, as always,' Thor sighed, burying his nose in his mother's soft, beautiful hair and planting a kiss on her forehead. With one arm he hugged her to his chest.

'I cannot.'

'I just want for them to be happy.'

'I know darling. A trial lays before them and we may only hope that their decisions are going to be the right ones.'

A tremor went over the chamber of healing, some of the healers shouting in distress when the ground shook under their feet. Thor's protective grip over his mother's shoulder tightened.

'Is that—?' He asked, eyes widening in disbelief.

'Yes, he's breaking free. We don't have much time!'

Frigga gestured for the healers to double their efforts. If they couldn't mend Tony's body on time, her son's future would be lost.

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## Chapter 41

The thin layer of ice cracked and shattered under his boots as Loki flicked his fingers to dislodge the smaller frost crystals that clung to his blue-colored skin. A feral grin spread over his thin lips as he took the last glance at the prison that Odin had kept him in—now dark and broken.

It was easier than he anticipated, to break free from the shimmering barrier the All-Father constructed. Loki's rage and hatred helped considerably when he struggled to crawl his way out through the force field, his body uncooperative and in shock after he got rid of all the *Seiðr* it held.

He would make the All-Father crawl at his feet, Loki swore, cooling the air surrounding him until small snowflakes began to form around him as he laboriously climbed to his feet.

Odin was a fool leaving only two guards outside the massive doors to Loki's prison. The Jotun didn't even spare a glance their way as he emerged, covered in frost and ice crystals, pushing the doors outwards with effort. They were waiting for him, spears at the ready, faces twisted in disgust, but Loki didn't have time to waste for them. His body now thrummed with all the *Seiðr* he poured into the barrier over the weeks he had spent in confinement, the magicks singing in his cold veins, almost begging to be let loose into the world. But not yet, Loki smiled as he bypassed two figures encased in thick ice.

*Not yet.*

His limbs still shook, as he ascended the long stairs, adrenaline being the main fuel of his abused body, but he couldn't stop, not now, not when he was so close to getting his revenge.

~

Tony woke up slowly, his eyelids heavy and unwilling to open when prompted. He yawned and tried to stretch, but a sudden pain in his sternum stopped him. Remembering where he was, Tony's eyes flew open and he wanted to sit up, but a strong hand on his shoulder held him back.

'No sudden movements, friend,' Thor smiled. 'Your body has gone through a great ordeal, and it is still too easy to undo all the work the healers have performed to mend it.'

'You— What—?' Stark croaked, his throat dry like a desert.

'Easy now, we'll answer all your questions.'

Only then Tony noticed that there was a third person in the room—the queen sat on the other side of his bed, a soft smile on her lips.

'How are you feeling?'

She offered Tony a chalice with a milky liquid sloshing inside, almost spilling over the rim. He

eyed it warily, then looked her in the eyes.

'Just a pain remedy,' Frigga assured.

'Will it make me sleep?'

'It should not, but you are an unique case, Anthony. Now that your body doesn't have to defend itself from the foreign object in your chest anymore, the transformation will proceed more smoothly. Soon, you should resemble Aesir more than humans,' the queen explained.

'Transformation? What the hell?' Stark asked alarmed.

Anger rose in his chest, boiling in his sternum right under the place where the arc reactor used to sit; his ribcage felt weird, too light and almost weightless; it was too easy to breathe, it made his head spin.

'You people don't understand the concept of consent, do you?' the inventor growled. Lifting himself up on his elbows, he tuned out the tendrils of pain that wove around his chest. The absence of the arc reactor made him feel naked and defenseless.

'Have care, friend, how you speak to the queen,' Thor warned, but Tony was too angry to care.

'You do whatever you please, damn the consequences. You manipulate and spout half-truths to further your plans, without regard for those you use in your schemes!' Tony panted, one hand pressed to the center of his chest. It felt wrong without the casing's metal edges to ground him, and the reactor's soft hum and warmth. He used to imagine how it would feel without the added weight in his chest, when he finally decided to undergo the medical procedure to remove the shrapnel. Now that it was done, it made him feel vulnerable. Empty.

Thor moved closer to the inventor, one hand outstretched ominously, but the queen stopped him.

'I am truly sorry for what was done to you, and I admit to be partially to blame, but your anger won't help you now. When my husband will summon you, you'll have to be clear headed and calm, for your sake, and Loki's. Drink,' she ordered, placing the chalice in Tony's hands. He clutched it tightly so the contents wouldn't spill, but was still reluctant to obey.

'Where is Loki?' Tony asked instead.

'Locked away,' Frigga sighed, lowering her eyes to the bed sheets. 'No one is allowed to visit him, but you can sometimes feel his *Seiðr*, when he tests the boundaries of his prison. Very soon he will be free and you have to be there when that happens.'

'Why?'

'Drink, Anthony, and I will tell you what I can. For Loki's sake, if not yours.'

Tony glanced down at the white concoction. He really shouldn't be drinking anything those Aesir give him, it always ended badly for him, but he was weak, and if this thing would help him recover quicker... he was so close to seeing Loki again, he couldn't afford to be weak.

'Fine,' he huffed and downed the contents of the chalice before he could change his mind. A pleasant warmth spread throughout his chest and limbs, tense muscle relaxing, and Tony sank back into the pillows with a content sigh. Frigga began her tale, and Tony listened with his eyes closed. He didn't exactly feel sleepy, but he had trouble keeping his eyes open.

'Don't fight the feeling, it will pass soon,' the queen assured.

The inventor let himself drift for a moment, and when he opened his eyes again his mind was sharp and alert.

'Damn, that's better than coffee!'

Thor laughed on his right. 'It is indeed!'

Now that he was more aware, Tony looked beyond his two interlocutors to look around the room they placed him in. High arched ceilings and grand windows were the main theme of the decor; other than a bed, a throng of throw pillows and furs under one window, and a vanity against the far wall, there was not much to look at.

Tony pushed up on his elbows and inhaled deeply. The pain that answered him was almost nonexistent now, thanks to Frigga's concoction, so he shoved himself all the way up to sit, the light cover someone had thrown over him falling to his lap.

Tony's whole torso was tightly wrapped in white, pleasantly smelling linens. The inventor pressed a palm to his sternum where the arc reactor used to be, but felt only the soft press of flesh and sinew under the cloth, no metal casing, or worse: no gaping hole, in his chest. Tony exhaled a shaky breath that he hadn't even known he was holding. It didn't feel right.

'A change of garments for you,' the queen gestured to a neatly folded stack of clothes sitting at the foot of the bed. 'I shall wait outside. Thor will help you dress.'

'Thanks,' he muttered watching her go.

The silence stretched while Tony crawled out of bed, buck-ass naked and began to inspect the clothes he was given.

'You have something to say, spill it,' the inventor sighed, trying on something that vaguely looked like underwear.

'I'm sorry, Tony. My family caused you much pain. Had I not brought Loki to your home—'

'No, okay, *stop!*' Tony grimaced. 'It was my decision to let you stay. I could have shown you the middle finger, and send you on your merry way to Fury. Listen, I—I know shit happens sometimes, shit that you have no control over. It's not your fault, and I don't blame you. It's just... we've been through a lot, and I'm really tired of it all. I just want to take Loki home.'

Thor nodded and his grim expression cleared slightly. He was about to sit on the edge of Tony's bed when a loud knock sounded from the door.

'Enter,' the thunderer ordered and watched a guard march in.

'My prince,' the man saluted, 'I am to escort you and your companion to the throne room. The All-Father demands your presence.'

'Aye, we'll go once my friend is presentable. Dress, Tony Stark, you're about to meet the All-Father.'

'Finally,' Tony smiled dangerously.

Another guard fell before him, and Loki stepped over his frozen body without as much as a glance down. There were more and more of them as he progressed through the dungeons, but for now they were hardly any challenge. Loki wouldn't waste his anger and energy on those curs, he had a more dangerous prey to hunt.

Half a dozen Einherjar came running from the side corridor, their spears glinting ominously in the golden light of the prison cells. Loki ducked under the first weapon thrust in his way and swiftly lay an open palm over the warrior's chest, freezing him solid. Sidestepping the figure, he pivoted away from another attack when two weapons tried to spear him from two sides. Those were Odin's honor guards, the best trained warriors of Asgard, they wouldn't get in each other's way while fighting in formation, so trying to fight in close combat wasn't an option for Loki. With a tap of his boot he froze the ground under their feet, molding the ice for it to be smooth as glass. Two of his opponents instantly fell to the ground, the other three wobbled unsteadily on the slippery ground, and it was the only distraction Loki needed to finish them off. With a smirk he moved forward, noticing that some of the prisoners in the cells backed away when he passed. He must finally look like the monster they always painted him to be—blue skinned and bloody, with his coat in shambles and hair partially frozen and flying wildly around his face. They wanted a demon to blame, well, he would finally give them one.

Loki wasn't a fool, he knew that his chances of defeating Odin were slim, if not nonexistent. He tried to conserve his *Seiðr* as best as he could, but it still wouldn't be enough. Odin would likely kill him, he knew; at this point there was no alternative, Odin wouldn't let him go, not after everything he had done, and Loki wouldn't let himself be thrown into prison again. The image of Tony sprang from his memory, the inventor laughing at something Dum-E did, it made Loki's chest constrict painfully at the realization that he would never see that again—the brilliant smile, the warm brown eyes, beautiful lips, so skillful and perfect. Loki wished he could just snatch Tony and run far away from Odin and the Nine Realms all together, but his presence in Tony's life had done enough damage already; he wouldn't wish upon him a life of exile, always hunted and never safe. Tony would resent him for kidnapping him from his precious Earth, from his friends and family, his inventions and home. There was no life at his side, and Loki was keenly aware of that. Odin had made it plainly clear, and the only way for Tony to be free again was for Loki to cease being the problem, one way or another.

The corridors widened, making it hard for Loki to guard his flank. Someone must have sounded an alarm because more and more guards tried to stop him. They were still no match for him, but they slowed his progress considerably. He was just finishing with the latest group when he heard a familiar sound of throwing daggers swishing through the air. Loki had just a fraction of a second to shield himself from the projectiles using his opponent's body, too tangled in the fray to dodge properly. When the warrior's body slumped to the ground with a dull thump, the Jotun looked up with a sneer—he knew those daggers. The Warriors Three, led by Lady Sif, stood in the middle of the corridor with weapons drawn and ready to shed blood, *his* blood. Loki barked out a laugh

'Well, well, the royal lapdogs have finally arrived,' Loki drawled, his toothy grin wide and insincere. 'You came to bark at your masters?'

'Surrender, monster!' Sif spat, hefting up her shield to make it sit more comfortably against her arm.

'Just like that?' Loki feigned surprise. In his right hand a spear of ice began to form. 'It would be too dull, don't you think? After all, it's not every day that you can stab your friend in the back. Tell me Sif, did you enjoy betraying your king?'

'Silence! I will not listen to your treacherous words!'



The warriors subtly began to move, trying to surround him, but Loki knew those tactics, he came up with half of them himself. One on one, he was confident he would win easily, but the odds weren't in his favor this time, and together his opponents were a deadly force that he couldn't afford to underestimate. His only option was to separate them for long enough to deal with them one at the time. It would be hard to do, they knew his fighting style almost as well as he knew theirs.

Making up his mind, Loki stepped to the side, mourning the amount of *Seiðr* he had to sacrifice to construct a tangible copy of himself.

'Well then, let's not waste time, shall we,' the clone smiled ugly.

'I have places to be,' Loki finished, mimicking the doppler's expression.

Without waiting for a reply, the two Jotnar lunged forward, moving in tandem like one being. Loki jumped towards Sif, aiming for her calves, while the clone engaged with Fandral parrying his foil to the side. The exchange of blows was quick and messy, aimed to assess their opponents' skill.

Loki managed to push Sif away from the group, but that left the clone fighting against the other three. The problem was that any damage his construct sustained in the battle would reflect on Loki's body, and in the end the amount of wounds could potentially kill him, even if his opponents lay defeated on the ground. He had to win this fight quickly, or he wouldn't win it at all.

'Dear Sif, how is it to watch your beloved throw everything away to pursue the love of a mortal? I admit, it must have been a pleasant change for Thor from all this cold steel and poisonous fury, to be able to indulge in a soft and willing body,' Loki sighed, keenly observing the warrior's face from under his half lidded eyes. Sif was almost as easy to rile up as Thor was—a few well-placed words and she was seething. For Loki, at this point, it could be as much an advantage as a disadvantage. Depending on the woman's focus in battle, her rage could easily be her downfall, but it could also be Loki's. Yet the mage was willing to take the gambit. He was losing time.

Sif howled and advanced, pointing her sword at Loki's throat and the Jotun had precious little time to duck, the pointy end nicking his skin too close to the jugular vein. Her next blow came even faster, forcing Loki to engage in close combat. Deflecting her attacks with his staff wasn't easy as she stormed his defenses like a hurricane. Chips of ice began to splinter away from his weapon and Loki had to focus to keep it intact. He could feel his clone being pushed into a corner on the other side of the hall. He was losing, and he had to quickly think up a way out of this situation.

Sif's next attack aimed again at his neck, intent on severing his head. Loki deflected away and downwards, but the ice spear he wielded broke from the impact, and the Jotun was suddenly left weaponless. Making a desperate effort, he closed the distance between them and pushed at the shield Sif hid behind, his palm flat against the cold steel. The warrior maiden wouldn't budge, and they both struggled to overpower the other. Sif hissed, pushing with all her might, to not get tipped over instead, and she was winning, forcing Loki back, until he suddenly smiled at her, his white, pointy teeth a stark contrast against his blue complexion. Before Sif could comprehend that she was being led into a trap, two large ice spears burst through her shield, piercing it as if it was paper, and lodged themselves deep into her shoulder. The shield shattered as Sif stumbled back, eyes wide and in shock. With a flick of his fingers Loki sent forth a burst of cold air and let it envelope her in a thick sheet of ice.

But there was no time to celebrate his victory, when a sudden stab of pain in Loki's side reminded him that the fight wasn't over yet. He turned in time to see Hogun rip out one of his daggers from his clone's flank. Without hesitation Loki conjured another ice spear, this time shorter and thicker and threw it at the Warriors Three. It shattered against Volstagg's raised battle axe spraying razor sharp shards in all directions. The warriors scrambled shouting, many of the ice fragments

managing to penetrate their armors, sticking out from their bodies in every which way. Fandral groaned, ripping out one particularly large fragment from his forearm, the Jotun ice vaporizing quickly in contact with Aesir skin.

'You'll pay for this!' Volstagg roared, spinning his battle axe overhead, seemingly unaware of several sharp icicles sticking out from his body. He attacked the clone with fury, hacking at it with mighty force. The doppelganger had trouble keeping up and acquired several deep cuts in the process of dodging and staying alive.

Loki grunted from pain, but his focus was on the two warriors coming his way, faces grim, and determined to kill him. He smiled at them, another spear forming in his hand—he would rather keep them at a distance. Fandral moved first, jumping forward, the tip of his foil reaching for Loki's heart, and the Jotun had to swiftly move out of the way to avoid it, but Hogun was already waiting for him and his deadly morning star grazed Loki's thigh, leaving deep bloody gashes in its wake. The mage cursed when the injured leg folded under him and he sank to the ground, narrowly avoiding a meeting with the foil. Loki rolled back and tried to stand, but was unable to, the pain in his leg a hot agony. The blood was flowing freely from the wound, soaking his pants and boot. Letting go of the spear, Loki threw a series of projectiles to distract his opponents, and with his left hand froze the wound. It was a temporary solution at best, but he didn't exactly have time to think up a better plan.

'Not so cheerful anymore?' Fandral goaded, carefully maneuvering between the shards of ice strewn all over the floor. This gave Loki an idea; he stumbled back, careful to not put too much pressure on his injured leg and made a series of complicated hand gestures. The shards jumped into the air as if attached to a string, and exploded, turning into dust and forming a cloud of sharp micro crystals. Loki covered his mouth and nose, protecting himself from the tiny crystals, but judging from the painful inhales followed by coughing, his adversaries didn't think of that.

In his short respite, Loki had fallen back enough to chance a glance at the clone and was horrified to see it sprawled on the ground and about to be cleaved in half by Volstagg's great battle axe. Without thinking, he dismissed the doppelganger, feeling all its injuries form back on his body. He was beginning to feel dizzy from all the blood loss, but couldn't stop now, so close to victory. As fast as he was able to, Loki approached Hogun and Fandral, both of them disoriented and on the verge of suffocating, and froze their bodies just like he did with Sif. If it was up to him, he would gladly kill them, but he owed Thor a great deal, and knew that his brother would be devastated and later blame himself for their deaths.

This done, Loki gathered the remnants of the cloud, and manipulated it to envelope Volstagg. Shutting his hand into a tight fist, he ordered the dust to cling to the warrior's body and solidify.

Loki slumped exhausted to the ground, panting heavily. The fight left him shaking, but at least, for the first time in his long life, he had won against the brute trio and Sif. Tired and bloody, Loki burst out into laughter. If they were able to, they would have called him a cheater, a man without honor, but in the end it was Loki who was left standing victorious and not them.

Loki refroze the wound on his thigh and stood up with difficulty, he still had a long way to go.

~

The leather jacket they made him wear was impossibly stiff and uncomfortable, but Tony had to admit it looked awesome on him. Embroidered with a golden thread, it accentuated his features and, thanks to the cut ending just above his thighs, it made him look taller. Together with knee long boots and black, leather pants, he looked almost like a native. But he was infinitely grateful that there wasn't a cape involved. It would have been too much, even for him.

When Tony finished dressing himself, Thor took him outside, where four guards and the queen waited. The men moved into position on their sides and led them through many long corridors and great halls.

Tony had some time to look around and marvel at the grand architecture. Almost everything was golden here—even the veins in the marble-like stone on the floor glinted with it in the sunlight. Tony shook his head with a smile, now he could see why both Thor and Loki could find his tower somewhat lacking.

There was a commotion when a contingent of guards ran passed them in full armor. Neither Thor, nor Frigga commented on it, but Tony noticed that the thunderer's expression fell, as his eyes lingered on the group.

Finally, they were ushered into a grand hall, almost empty if one disregarded the two dozen guards standing watch under the big columns, and the man sitting on a big ass throne further in.

*Odin.*

Tony gritted his teeth as they approached and he could make out details and see the god's expression clearly.

The All-Father's look was impassive, almost bored, when he looked at Tony. As if the man before him was nothing but an insect not even worth stepping on. The inventor regretted not having his armor on, but there was no time to retrieve it.

They bowed as the protocol dictated, and waited for Odin to address them.

'Thor,' the All-Father began, contempt lacing his voice.

With a corner of his eye Tony noticed that the thunderer flinched as if struck.

'You committed great crimes against Asgard. You disregarded your king's explicit order and aided a criminal in his escape. You attacked the guards and left the realm without permission. You endangered the peace of all Nine Realms letting the criminal loose on the world.'

Tony was about to open his mouth and tell Odin in explicit language what he thought of him, when Frigga's hand landed on his shoulder. He looked at the queen with barely hidden fury, but she only shook her head. *Not now*, the gesture said, and Tony had to really fight himself to keep his mouth shut and not doom them all.

The All-Father continued his tirade, yapping about the greater good and duty to the crown, and it was all so sickening that Tony wanted to puke.

When he was finally done scolding Thor, his attention shifted to Tony.

'And you, mortal. What do you hope to accomplish here?'

Tony was about to reply, but Odin interrupted, ordering instead.

'Leave us, I wish to speak to the mortal alone!'

Thor wanted to protest, but the queen whispered something to him Tony didn't quite catch, and begrudgingly the thunderer let himself be led to the side entrance, leaving Tony alone with the despot and his shiny guards.

Great, Tony thought grimly. He was just a step away from insulting Odin and earning himself a spectacular decapitation.

‘Speak now,’ the king allowed, but once again, before Tony could even open his mouth he was stopped.

All of a sudden, there was a commotion at the back of the chamber. People screamed outside, and when Tony turned to see what the fuss was all about, the massive double door exploded inwards. When the dust settled and the engineer could make out who was behind this unexpected and spectacular entrance, his heart stopped in his freshly reconstructed chest. Strolling through the hall as if he had owned this place was Loki—bloody, battered, and blue. He looked like a wraith—hair wild and frosted in places, clothes in tatters, a long icy spear clutched in one hand and a feral grin plastered all over his face. The guards that sprang to stop him were all frozen solid before they even had a chance to reach him.

When he moved closer, Tony noticed the tiny snowflakes dancing about his person, and if not for the haunted look in his lover's eyes, he would find it cute.

When their eyes finally met, the Jotun's grin only widened and Loki began to laugh.

~ ~ ~

## Chapter 42

Loki laughed and laughed, until his lungs couldn't take it anymore, and then laughed some more. Every time he took a glance at this Tony, he just couldn't stop himself.

'What is the meaning of this?' Odin demanded from his high throne, his one good eye glaring at the trickster, as if in search of another ploy.

'I thought better of you, All-Father,' Loki whizzed out, after what felt like forever. He took another glance at the usurper and grinned—wide as a shark.

This *Tony* that he was presented with looked nothing like *his* Tony. Odin did a poor job crafting the illusion; the usurper's eyes were too bright—the shade of brown too rich, the color more resembling mead than chocolate; he also looked healthier, even if there were dark circles under his eyes—a nice touch, but ultimately irrelevant. And the attire they dressed him in... by the Norns, Loki would have paid a fortune to see his Tony in those garments—the tight leather pants and high boots accentuated how well shaped and deliciously strong his legs truly were; the leather doublet with fastenings on both sides tailored perfectly to fit his figure, with golden thread embroidered into the collar, branching down, swirling along his torso, giving the impression of him being a wealthy lord, or even a Vanir prince. Fitting, Loki mused, filling his eyes with the sight. If he were to die today, he would at least have that.

'You should have paid more attention to the fine details, All-Father,' Loki shook his head. 'While this is a lovely view, it is also very inaccurate.'

'What?!' Tony protested, confused by Loki's words. 'Babe, it's really me! Your sexy, genius, billionaire boyfriend! Come on, you think someone could mimic that?' Stark pointed at himself, a cheesy grin on his face to placate his lover. 'Do you know how long it takes to style the beard—'

'Silence fiend!' Loki growled, brandishing his spear in Tony's direction. The genius' jaw clicked shut, stunned by the display of hostility.

The Jotun turned to Odin and they stared at each other briefly.

'Your vision lacks one of the most important features that separates Tony Stark from any other man.'

Loki strutted towards the mortal, hot gaze raking over his body.

'Loki—' Tony whispered, when they were mere inches apart.

'The arc reactor,' the Jotun continued, deaf to Tony's plea. With a cold finger he trailed a circle over Tony's chest where the device used to be. 'I could always hear its song, but this—!'



Loki seized the inventor's jaw, his frigid fingertips burning Stark's flesh and leaving frostbite in their wake. He gazed at Tony, deep into his unnaturally golden eyes, searching for the lie.

'It is not him! And that is the proof!'

He lifted the usurper off the ground, causing more and more damage to his face and throat. He wanted to raze the image of Tony from this body, to shatter the illusion. It disgusted him to see his lover's face contorted with pain, trying to choke out some words and failing, but he would have no one use this visage to fool him.

'My touch *never* hurt Tony!' Loki snarled at Odin. 'This proves that underneath your illusion an Asgardian hides, and that you wanted to use Tony's image to deceive me! But I will not be fooled. This ends here!'

Loki let go of the body, letting it crumble to the ground, seizing with a coughing fit and wheezing for air. He looked to Odin as his ice spear touched the impostor's blackened throat, ready to pierce it. But the king sat unmoving, appeared bored even, and Loki's hand faltered. He would surely want to defend one of his subjects, wouldn't he? It must be a ruse to test Loki's mettle, his willingness to do what must be done.

'You are indeed beyond saving,' the king shook his head instead.

A contingent of guards burst through the destroyed entryway into the chamber, brandishing their weapons at the Jotun—cold, well-used steel glinting in the bright light of the enchanted cones he himself once helped light up.

Loki's attention strayed from the king, sweeping across the space around him and assessing his chances.

They were nonexistent, Loki quickly concluded; he was surrounded and heavily outnumbered; his leg ached and could barely support his weight. He had no chance of winning, he had lost his only opportunity to strike at Odin by wasting time dealing with the impostor.

Loki closed his eyes, unshed tears clinging to his eyelashes. Once again the All-Father had outsmarted him. A simple illusion was enough to distract him from his goal, to occupy his mind with the thoughts of his lost lover.

Loki looked to the man sprawled on the ground and felt sorrow squeeze his throat. Yet again he had accomplished nothing, proved once more to the All-Father that he wasn't a worthy opponent. He would die here like a common thug, his body thrown out to the dogs to be torn apart, disgraced.

It was all for naught.

Loki's shoulders began shaking—he couldn't tell if from impotent fury or the knowledge that his time to die had come.

His thoughts once more traveled to Tony. His beautiful, fierce lover—always on the move, always inventing, challenging the world around him to bend to his will. Loud and rash, but also quiet and contemplative when the mood struck him.

Loki remembered the gentleness Tony displayed towards him, when by all rights he could have hurt him when Loki was the most vulnerable. Remembered the patience, when Loki was obtuse, wallowing in his own misery; when he had panic attacks, or when he injured himself.

The feel of Tony's calloused fingertips upon his cheeks, lips and scarred eyes. The first time they

kissed; the first time they made love. The way he begged Loki not to go with the Einherjar...

A tear rolled down Loki's cheek, slowly freezing until it fell off his chin as a tiny drop-shaped ice crystal. What he wouldn't give to just embrace his lover once again. To see him smile with love and pride, delighted when Loki understood one of his infernal pop culture jokes.

Pride... yes, Tony was never ashamed of him, and Loki wouldn't give him a reason to start now.

Mustering the remnants of his resolve, Loki gripped his ice spear tighter. He would at least die on his own terms—fighting to the last drop of blood. *Give them hell*, Tony had said, and he intended to. He still had enough Seiðr in his body to put up a good fight and take at least some of his opponents with him to Hel.

Loki felt calm descend upon his mind. He easily slipped into his favorite fighting stance, the his left palm lightning up with blue flames as he waited for the first warriors to approach. They were eager, he saw, to attack the Jotun scum that troubled their king.

But one gesture from the All-Father made the Einherjar stand down and retreat.

'Everywhere you go, death follows. You are like a rabid animal, biting the hand that feeds it, first mine, then his,' Odin gestured to Stark's form still sprawled on the ground.

'Now you see, human, the trickster cannot be trusted. He will turn on you at the first opportunity. He's a sly liar and a manipulator. He spouts only untruths—that is his nature. He used you to free himself from my bindings and then left you when you weren't needed anymore. Now he lifts a hand on you, even unprovoked.'

'I don't believe that,' Stark sat up with a grunt, his voice barely recognizable.

Loki made a double take, his gaze quickly jumping from Odin to Tony. Did he make a mistake? But how could it be? This man was nothing like Stark. Yes, he looked like him, but the resemblance was only superficial. He appeared more Aesir than human, and Loki's cold, blue fingers burned him...

'I believe that his feelings are genuine, he's just... confused. Imprisonment and torture does that to you.'

The trickster's eyes widened when the realization struck. How could he have forgotten? Odin told him before that Tony had been injected with the golden apple extract. Loki never witnessed a mortal undertake the transformation after eating the apple, but maybe not only would his strength and stamina increase, but perhaps his appearance would change too? Could it be?

Loki took a step back, horrified by what he had done. If this was his Tony, then he just went out of his way to hurt him. He almost killed him!

Loki fixated on the blackened patches of skin on Tony's throat, willing them to heal, to evaporate into the ether.

The Jotun's breathing sped up—gone was his calm facade. He needed to go to Tony, to help him, but he didn't dare. Even the briefest of touches from this accursed form of his would bring his lover pain.

Loki was rooted to the ground, unable to make a decision. He tuned out everything around him except Tony. Odin's voice was just a background noise, barely registering in his addled brain.

'The only way to put the animal out of its misery, is to strike it down,' the All-Father droned from his high perch, oblivious to the internal turmoil Loki was going through.

'Oh for fucks sake!' Tony grunted, attempting to stand up. 'Do you even listen to yourselves? No wonder this family is nuts! Can't you talk like normal people?'

'You!' The engineer pointed at Loki who startled badly. 'I didn't fucking help reinvent space-warp travel in record time to be welcomed by a death grip on my throat, that got old really fast. Your step-dad, or adopted, or whatever, gave me some kind of serum made from your stupid apples, and now I'm like this: half Aesir, half human. Your mother said that I'm undergoing a transformation, so you will have to deal with this. Okay?'

'Tony?' Loki took a tentative step forward and stopped. A second look at the mortal revealed more similarities between him and the Tony Loki knew before. His defiant posture, the tone of his voice, the words, it all screamed Tony Stark, and Loki's heart skipped a beat. Tony looked different, yes, but it was a good change. He somehow managed to take up more space now, he looked confident (not that he wasn't before, but now it felt different), even when surrounded by Odin's royal guard. He stood before the All-Father like an equal and not a weak and insignificant mortal. Loki took in the picture and his chest swelled with pride. Tony looked like a god.

But there was one thing that the trickster couldn't let go.

'But, what about your arc reactor? I can't—I can't sense it.'

Loki eyed the inventor and tried to concentrate on the hum that used to accompany Tony wherever he went, but it was gone. The only sound that used to bring him peace, when he needed it most, a sound he associated with safety and security, that always helped him locate Tony when his eyes weren't able to. Now the sound was gone.

'It had to be removed. It was, well... fucking up with my new and shiny healing abilities,' Stark shot him a wry smile and tapped his chest. 'Only skin and bone now, baby. Wait, that sounded wrong!'

Loki rolled his eyes, a small smile gracing his lips, and took another step towards the inventor, but the guard closest to them thrust a spear in his direction.

'Whoa there, we're just talking,' Tony threw his hands up in a placating gesture, but the warrior didn't even seem to notice him, his undivided attention on the Jotun.

'This is what I'm talking about, do you guys always resolve everything with pointy things, and ask questions like *never*?' Stark grimaced.

'There are no questions to be asked,' Odin replied, bored by their little chit-chat. 'Time and again Loki defies my orders, kills innocents and is unrepentant. And now he dares to lift a hand on his king!'

The Jotun wanted to argue, but Tony stopped him.

'I can't argue with that, Loki committed some serious crimes, but is Thor, or are *you*, for the matter, any better? You!' Stark pointed at Odin. 'So high and mighty, sitting on your golden throne, you think you know it all, don't you? Well think again.'

The All-Father growled at the offense, but Tony was only just getting started.

'You sit here idle, surrounded by past centuries glory, and look with disdain on the rest of the Nine Realms, thinking yourself above them, only because your guns are bigger than that of the rest of us.'

You are stagnant. In your ignorance of the potential of other races, you think yourself the epitome of innovation. You have had hundreds, if not thousands of years to progress, but at some point you got lazy and decided that it was enough and that you reached the peak of your greatness.'

On Earth, or Midgard if you will, we have short lives. Very fragile and meaningless maybe, by your standards, but it is an advantage your race lacks.

We want our lives to matter, to leave something behind to be remembered by. We are constantly evolving. If for the better, I can't say. But we try, and even if we sometimes fail, we just get up and try again, and again, and again, so the world could be a tiny bit better for the next generation to come. The progress is slow, but we are making it.

We are actually *trying* to be better.'

Tony took a deep breath. Sometime during the tirade he started to pace in front of the dais Odin's throne stood on. Loki was at the same time mesmerized by his lover and horrified by his own actions. How could he not recognize Tony? His lover was right in front of him and he failed to see the truth, paranoid that it was another of Odin's schemes. He hurt Tony, and almost killed him. How could he ever atone for that?

The All-Father's voice disrupted Loki's dark thoughts, returning his attention to the conversation at hand.

'How is this relevant?'

'Oh, it is. It very much is.'

Tony began anew, his tone that of a mentor trying to explain a concept to a slow pupil.

'You see, you took a brilliant mind and shut it away, isolated it, because his ideas were different from yours, and created chaos in your small bubble of a perfect world. You were scared of the changes his words could initiate, so you refused to listen to him all together. You muzzled and shackled him, then punished severely for his transgressions against Earth. Yet I heard that your other son, the golden one, if you recall, for the same offense got a slap on the hands and a three day vacation on Earth!'

Tony stopped abruptly, right in front of the throne. He stood straight, head raised, fearless even before the Father of All. It worried Loki. Odin didn't take kindly to being talked down. Tony made him look like a fool and he would pay for that, Loki just knew it.

'Tell me, how is this justice? How is this fair? And more importantly, how does this help *us*—the wronged party?' Stark's voice rang through the hall, strong and glorious, teeming with righteous fury, and Loki wanted nothing more than to touch him, but he knew he couldn't, he did enough damage already, something he will never forgive himself for doing. But he could stand with him, to face Odin's wrath together.

Loki moved to Tony's side. Shoulder to shoulder, they stood in front of the mightiest of gods, both proud and fearless, regardless of the consequences. A corner of Tony's mouth lifted when he spotted Loki at his side, and his fingers grazed the trickster's cold hand briefly, before he remembered that he couldn't touch him freely in that form.

'You claim you can deliver a better punishment than the All-Father himself?' Odin asked, incredulous.

'No. As far as I'm concerned, Loki suffered enough. Don't you see? Him being locked away,

rotting in some god forsaken dungeon helps no one. It only makes him crave revenge more.

Give him to us, let us use his talents to make amends to the people he once wanted to rule over. Let him work to earn forgiveness. Or at least try, because it won't be easy, and not everyone will be happy, but keeping him under lock and key helps absolutely no one!

Let him earn his freedom back, just like you let Thor earn his—through action, not idleness!

Tony fell silent, the echo of his voice slowly dissipating in the grand hall. Odin stared at them with his one eye half closed, scrutinizing or maybe judging.

It felt like forever and Loki was starting to hope, against all his previous experience, that maybe Tony's words somehow managed to reach the All-Father and make him reconsider.

'I disagree,' were the words Odin finally spoke, and Loki's Seiðr instantly ignited in his veins, fueled by the rage they invoked.

'Loki is beyond redemption, but I refuse to deal with him any longer. The burden will fall to you now, Anthony Stark, and it will be your neck on the line if he oversteps again.'

Loki felt as if he was just punched in the gut, his vision swam, the injured leg almost giving out under him. Odin was releasing him into Tony's custody?

'Would this please you, wife?' The All-Father asked, glancing to the side. The queen emerged from the shadows behind the throne, with Thor right behind her, smiling brightly down at her husband.

'Is this not what you fought for, all these years?'

'Indeed,' Frigga beamed. 'The Norns set a difficult path for us, but we all managed to walk it till the end.'

'There are, of course, conditions,' Loki stated more than asked, still suspicious.

'There are. I shall bind you to this mortal and to Midgard, so you won't just disappear the moment I take my eye off you.'

'Ha! The binding has already been done,' Tony snorted and grinning, turned to Loki. 'Jarvis told me that apparently when we were in Vegas partying our asses off, at some point we stumbled into a chapel and got married!'

'What?' The Jotun asked confused.

'We—' Tony pointed first to himself then to Loki, 'are married. Legally. You are my spouse, and therefore technically a citizen of the United States. I have papers for that, you know.'

Tony beamed, his eyes crinkling with mirth. The news were so unexpected and delivered at such a bad time that the trickster couldn't wrap his head around it. He stared incredulous at Tony as silence fell on the room.

'And you're not happy,' Stark's smile fell. He massaged the back of his neck and looked away. 'I thought you would be,' he said quietly, disappointed.

'I—I am. It's just unexpected news, and I don't really remember—'

'Yeah, we were drunk as hell,' Tony chuckled.



He looked at Loki, a shy spark of hope in his amber eyes, and went to grab his hand, but hissed when his skin got burned again.

'Can you do something about—'

Loki looked at himself—the blue expanse of skin under tattered clothes, ice crystals in his too long hair. He looked like a true savage. He glanced at the guards around them, still alert, but not openly hostile, then at Odin and Frigga who were discussing the finer details of his fate. Loki let his spear disintegrate and concentrated, willing his Seiðr to form a thin layer of illusion, tightly woven around his whole body. The ice keeping his leg intact fell away and Loki inhaled sharply. Tony was at his side in an instant, wrapping his arm around Loki's waist to help him distribute his weight better. Exhausted and in pain Loki rested his head against Tony's.

Thor approached them then nodding to both in greeting.

'I'm glad that you are well, or not in mortal danger at least,' he joked, patting Loki on the shoulder.

'Did I hear that right?' Frigga suddenly appeared at their side and made them all jump. 'You made your vows? How could you do that, Loki? And in secret!' She exclaimed agitated, waving her hands in front of them. 'And I was not invited! This will not stand. We will have to make a proper ceremony here, on Asgard. Yes! We will invite guests and decorate the throne hall—' she went on about the preparations, excited and happy, and just like that the tension was gone. They still would have to discuss the details of Loki's future, but for now they could finally rest.

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Loki lay sprawled on the dark furs covering his bed. With only a few bandages wrapped over more prominent wounds he made a gorgeous picture. Tony was seriously contemplating taking the furs with them to Earth, because the view was just too surreal. Loki's eyes were closed; hair—finally frost free and untangled—fanned around his head like a dark halo; his lips were parted, and Tony suspected that he was drooling a little, but it just made him seem more real.

After the whole ordeal was over and done, they were left to retire to Loki's rooms, where they could both be tended to by healers. Meanwhile Thor volunteered to go back to Earth to deliver a message to the Avengers about the events that took place today, and what was decided regarding Loki.

Tony undressed slowly, the countless buckles of his doublet giving him time to think. They would probably never be free from Odin's gaze, but, at least for now, they could lay low and enjoy their life together. And maybe, when Tony wouldn't have anything keeping him on Earth anymore, they could just vanish. It would be many years from now, so he was certain that Loki could break the binding that the All-Father wanted to place on him. Again. But for now they would be just content to go back to the Avengers Tower.

Finally done with his clothes Tony crawled naked onto the bed and hugged Loki close. The trickster murmured sleepy and nuzzled his cheek against Tony's bandaged chest, wrapping one arm around the inventor's waist. Tony smiled down at him and lightly kissed the top of his head. It was over. They won. Well, there was still Fury to deal with, and Tony grimaced thinking about the upcoming shitstorm, but they would deal with it together.

'Loki?'

'Yes, *elsker*?'

'How long do you think it will take you and Odin to draft the conditions of your release?'

'A few days, at most,' Loki yawned, blinking his eyes open to look at Tony, 'and then we can finally go home.'

Home.

***Their home.***

'Yeah, that sounds perfect.'

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## Epilogue

Tony watched the palm tree leaves sway in the warm, afternoon breeze outside his bedroom. He was glad to have the state of the art air conditioning installed in his Malibu house, otherwise he would be sweating his ass off right now, dressed as he was in the most expensive, three piece, hand tailored suit his money could buy. As it was, the air in his bedroom was pleasantly cool and he could feel it tingling on his neck, just above the collar of his dress shirt. Readjusting the faded golden bow tie for the tenth time, Tony turned away from the window and looked critically at himself in the full-length mirror.

'Stop fussing with it, you'll just make it worse,' Clint groaned from the recliner—he was sprawled on the thing, one leg dangling over the armrest.

Tony just took a cursory glance in his general direction, swiped the bow tie from his neck and started tying it anew.

Barton covered his face with a pillow.

'It was crooked,' Tony muttered.

The tip of his tongue stuck out in concentration, while his calloused fingers worked with the uncooperative fabric, trying to force it into the appropriate shape.

'Oh man,' the archer groaned again. He threw the pillow away and scrambled to his feet; with three long steps he was next to Tony, wiggling his fingers for the tie. The inventor sized him with a critical look, weighting the pros and cons of letting a trained assassin anywhere near his exposed throat, but in the end decided that a neatly tied bow tie was worth the risk of potential strangulation. Reluctantly he handed Barton the tie and just watched his swift work in the mirror—the bow tie ended up expertly fixed in no time.

'Undercover agent, remember?' Hawkeye grinned in response to Tony's surprised look.

'Right, thanks.'

Just as Clint stepped away, giving the inventor his personal space back, the door to Tony's bedroom opened and Natasha strode in without ceremony, Rhodey hot on her heels.

'What do you think?' Tony asked with a wide grin, throwing his arms to the sides.

'You're still missing this,' the redhead procured a small white rose boutonniere and pinned it to the lapel of Stark's white tuxedo. 'Perfect,' Natasha smiled and planted a soft kiss on the inventor's cheek. 'Congrats, Tony.'

The billionaire's smile grew even wider, his golden eyes crinkling with joy.

The whole situation felt surreal and he had to remind himself time and again that it wasn't a dream.

He was getting married to Loki... properly this time.

Their house in Malibu was decorated for the occasion with lots of fresh flower arrangements—white and green and smelling like spring; the guests were streaming in—Jarvis was updating him constantly about the status of the guest list; the kitchen staff was preparing for the reception, doing last minute adjustments to the menu... Pepper had outdone herself, and Tony couldn't have been more grateful for her help. Because for him, the most important thing right now was to look immaculately and remember his wedding vows.

It was kind of funny—technically, he and Loki were already married for almost two years; they lived together, had sex on a *very* regular basis, and were domestic to a fault, but this day felt... special somehow. Tony never thought himself to be a sentimental person, but even he couldn't deny having butterflies in his stomach at the mere thought of walking down the aisle next to Loki. He felt giddy with excitement and just couldn't wait to finally see his spouse, forbidden as he was to lay his eyes upon Loki for the whole day.

And it was about damn time too.

After returning from Asgard, there was just no time to think about a wedding or any kind of celebration. First, Tony had to settle the matter with Fury and S.H.I.E.L.D. It wasn't an easy task, since the old pirate held grudges like a hoarding dragon. Tony had to pull many strings in high places and practically threaten to withdraw all his funds from S.H.I.E.L.D. and other government-controlled organizations, for the higher ups to finally grant amnesty to Loki and let him become an asset for them instead. He was still on probation, even after two years of helping the Avengers and occasionally even Fury himself (albeit grudgingly), but he was accepted and mostly left alone to his own devices.

Loki's most remarkable assistance came during the Ultron crisis, when he helped clean the mess the rogue AI wrought. Without him, the casualty count in Sokovia would have been much greater. His magic, combined with that of the Scarlet Witch, created a kind of force field around the airborne part of the city, and prevented debris from wreaking havoc below the flying rock, where the evacuation effort was still in progress. Later, claiming that he felt responsible for the twins' future, since indirectly it was his fault (and Thanos' scepter's) that they were created, Loki took Scarlet Witch under his wing and became a sort of mentor for her, helping her unlock the full potential of her gifts. After that, they quickly became fast friends.

Before Tony could even blink, almost two years had passed.

Now that their lives were beginning to slow down a little, they could finally take the much needed break. Hence, the wedding.

Only their closest friends and family were invited. Jarvis was in charge of monitoring any

paparazzi activity around the property, tasked with scurrying through social media for any unauthorized footage or photo, and promptly deleting it. So far there wasn't much of a commotion, since both Loki's and Wanda's shield hid the premises from prying eyes.

Tony took a moment to once again inspect himself in the mirror, frowning at his reflection. It wasn't always easy, but somehow they had all managed to survive.

'You alright, Tony?' Rhodey asked, looking at him with concern.

He was appointed Tony's first man, since there wasn't a person on this planet the inventor trusted more. Rhodey was his best friend and support for most of Tony's grown up life, and when one day Tony coyly asked him if he would do him the honor, there wasn't even a shadow of hesitation in Rhodey's reply.

'He's getting cold feet,' Barton laughed, what earned him a swat to the head by Natasha's hand at the exact time Steve poked his head inside the room.

'Tony's getting cold feet?' The Cap asked, brow creased.

'I'm not!' Stark protested, finally leaving his reflection be and turning away from the mirror. 'How is it going down there?'

'We're almost ready for you. Bruce and Betty are stuck in traffic, but they should be here soon, Sam and Scott went to get them. Oh, and Clint,' Steve stepped into the room, leaving the door open just enough so he would still be visible to his companion waiting outside. 'Pietro has been looking for you—'

Tony tuned out his teammates' conversation and smiled at the shadow of Bucky hovering at the doorway behind Steve, who nodded in return. Cap's childhood friend was still rather shy and avoided bigger crowds, but he'd agreed to attend Tony's wedding. They became somewhat reluctant friends after Tony was tasked with reconstructing his metal arm, making it far less painful for the ex-soviet spy to use. They never talked much, but they felt companionable in their silence.

'We should be going,' Natasha said after a few moments of listening to Clint's whining about some bet he lost to one of the twins, and shooed everyone out. Tony listened to their voices slowly fade away in the corridor. His gaze traveled to the window and further down still, to the beach where the ceremony was about to take place. Most of the seats were already taken, only a few left empty at the front. He could see Pepper talking with the queen of Asgard, the only other relative of Loki, except Thor, that had come. Odin wasn't really welcomed anyway, and he didn't disappoint by not showing up.

Tony noticed Bruce hurrying to his seat, Betty's hand clutched snugly in his. How many hours had he spent convincing the doctor to finally reach out to his old friend, he couldn't tell, but seeing them together like that made it all worth the hassle.

Happy was there too, waiting for Pepper to take her seat next to him, with Jane and Darcy chattering excitedly a row behind him. Tony even spotted Coulson with his young protégé.

Tony's phone vibrated from the nightstand where it has been lying forgotten for the last few hours. The inventor snatched it up and smiled at the text that Loki sent him, complaining about Thor's infuriating fussing. Tony snorted, imagining Loki's irritated frown, and fired a quick reply before turning the device off.

*It was time.*



He took a last glance out the window, where the cloudless sky was beginning to turn pink as the sun slowly headed for the horizon. Somewhere in the distance, the ding of a ceramic chime could be heard over the animated chatter of his guests carried from the beach below. It was a gift from Pepper, a simple thing really, but it always managed to make Loki's face lighten up with a smile whenever he saw the colorful ceramic birds dancing on the wind.

*Not a dream*, Tony mouthed wordlessly, still in awe at the turn his life took. For the first time in a very long while, he was happy, *really happy*, and he just couldn't stop smiling.

'Wish me luck,' he winked at one of Jarvis' cameras.

Closing the door behind him with an air of finality, Tony went to search for Loki.

They would walk the rest of the path together, as they were meant to be.

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